AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル 4【上】

著●川上稔
イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

電撃文庫

4
【上】

—Everyone,
Now, listen.
To the true meaning of the promise.

The Ending Chronicle

Act.04

CHA TER

02

Name: Dan·Harakawa

Class: Student

Faith: Lives Alone

Name: Heo·Thunderson

Class: American

Faith: Demon Possessed

01

04

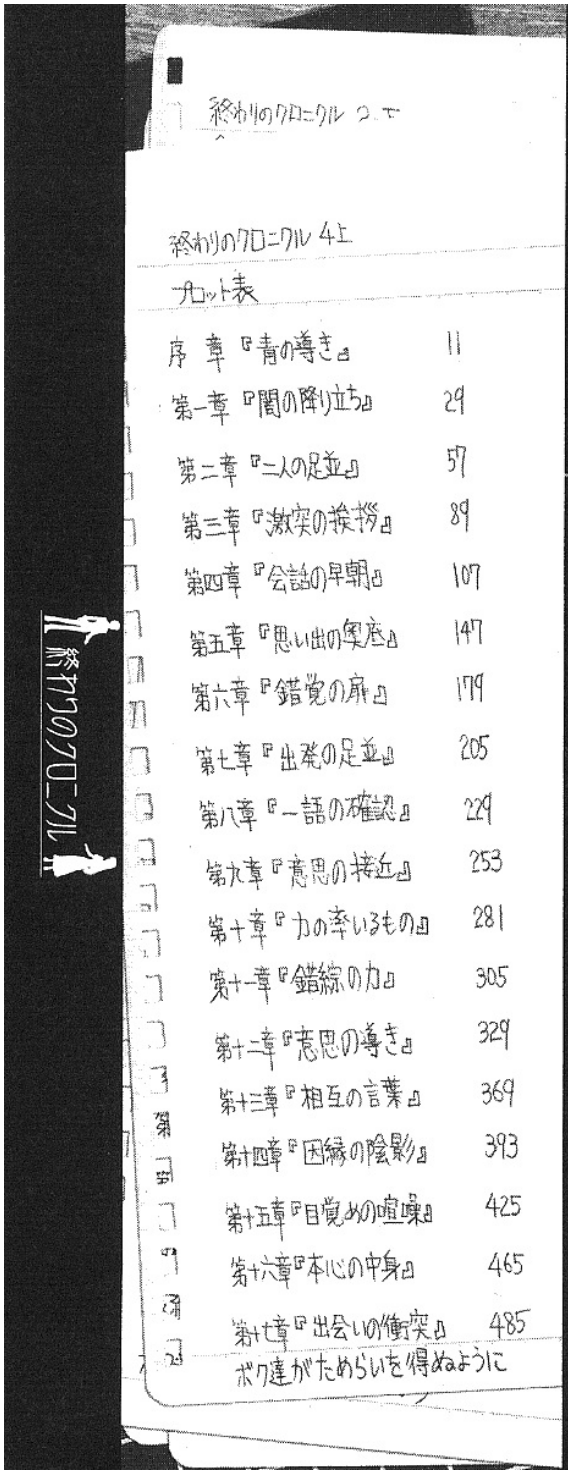
4th-Gear was a world of a three layer ring of land.
The rings rotated around the star in the center.
Plants that performed photosynthesis lived on the belt facing the star and plants that created cooling and the crust lived on the opposite side.
Together, they performed never-ending environmental activities.

· About 4th-Gear ·

4th-Gear was a Gear made up of a collection of plants.
Plants covered the world,
but they had a single collective will and the entire world became what could be viewed as a life form.
4th-Gear's world left its Concept Core with Tree Serpent Mukiti, but only one person was able to communicate properly with Mukiti during the Concept War.

Title: #8's Diary

Two months have passed since I moved to the horribly backwoods wonderful Japanese UCAT in Okutama.
I have grown accustomed to my work and other bizarre things odd jobs I must perform, so I have determined that I have done quite well here.
Today, my job is to decorate the lobby because the inspector from American UCAT is arriving.
While I was decorating, UCAT Director Ooshiro began acting bizarrely began jumping up and down, so I determined he was up to no good once again and punched him to the ground as per the manual I had been given upon moving here.
But according to the witnesses, he was not doing something stupid up to no good and had merely started jumping up and down for no reason. It seems I made my decision too hastily.
I am reflecting on my actions now.



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UCAT関係

Prologue

“Blue Guidance”

Where is the color of the sky?
You can ask
But you cannot grab ahold of it

●

A color could be seen.

It was the color blue. A deep, dark blue filled a great expanse above. A slightly darkened blue filled an expanse below.

Those two blues were the heavens and the earth as seen from the sky.

The sky above was empty, but the hazy blue earth was uneven and contained a white line.

The area below was mountainous and almost a desert, but with the color blue, it looked like the sandy bottom of the sea.

Something traveled through the center of that blue sky.

It resembled a dragon.

However, it had a metal body that reflected the sun and its surface contained several emblems and ID numbers.

As it cut through the wind, US-UCAT was written on both sides in white writing.

It was a mechanical dragon of American UCAT and that steel dragon was flying through the blue sky.

It was at least thirty meters long and five meters wide. It was painted blue and white and its overall form was a rectangle with a shallow slope at an acute angle.

It had a sharp face, a long tail, and no neck. Its four legs were drawn in and its two pairs of wings stuck out on either side.

Shimmering heat was ejected from what looked like the waist and the bottom of its legs.

It continued on while pushed by the accelerating heat.

The head facing its destination had a windshield. Inside that windshield was a single-seat cockpit. The pilot strapped into the deep seat wore a pressure suit and a helmet, but the suit was made of cloth and all of the consoles before him were analog.

He reached to his right toward a B5-size writing board with a few papers in its stopper. The top of the papers said “Test (Final)” and they gave the date “4.20.1945”.

They also gave the pilot’s name: Richard Thunderson.

Thunderson wrote the numbers on the instruments into a few of the fields on the documents and then returned his hand to the central control column.

The majority of the noise within the windshield was the racket of cutting through the wind at high altitude. That noise was joined by the metallic creaking of the craft and the roar of the ejected heat accelerating it.

Thunderson pulled on the control column while squeezing the throttle.

He flew.

The blue mechanical dragon turned upwards as if twisting its body. The walls of air on the top and bottom threatened to bring that turn to a stop.

"…!"

But a moment later, the dragon broke through the upper wall of resistance and the air coming from the front struck its bottom surface.

With the air resistance on its stomach, the dragon ascended as if climbing a slope.

The beating of the air sounded like an explosion and the disturbed air current burst into mist.

By the time that ended, the blue mechanical dragon had moved several hundred meters higher.

As it flew calmly through the air yet opposed the air all the while, a voice spoke over the communicator.

"b1 to base. The leg retraction and accelerators are working well. …Are your numbers good too?"

The voice was Thunderson's and he laughed before continuing.

"Is a1… Is that him!?"

Just as his question grew into a shout of expectation, the blue mechanical dragon heard a roar down below.

Before he could think that something was coming, a white line stabbed upwards through the sky only a few dozen meters to the right.

The line of mist looked like a contrail.

"!"

But it was erased by the great roar that followed after a short delay.

And something else arrived. It was overhead where nothing had been before.

It was a white mechanical dragon.

It was also about thirty meters long, it had no neck, and it had a long tail.

It resembled the blue one, but it was still different.

In order to fly more efficiently, the blue one had closed up its legs and expanded its wings.

However, the white one's legs were contracted but still extended out enough for landing and walking. Also, its wings did not extend out as far as the blue one's.

The blue one spoke over the communicator.

"Isn't that a bit sudden, James Davis?"

"I'm a1 right now, Richard Thunderson."

The white one replied and they both gave bitter laughs.

The white one took a slightly upward path with its short wings cutting through the sky.

"Did you see that ascent speed? Mine will be the one chosen for official use."

"C'mon now. Don't think ascent speed is enough to win, James. Are you actually amazingly stupid by any chance? For one thing, that structure leaves you barely able to turn. You put everything into acceleration, so that's all you have."

"Now you've said it. Then again, you're right about one thing. I haven't shown what it can really do yet. How about yours? You've been making tons of small adjustments, but it still doesn't have any explosion of power, does it?"

"An aircraft needs stability. I can't put the pilot's life in danger. Especially when that pilot is me."

"That's an excuse for rejecting new ideas. You've been like that since our school days and that's why-…"

"You're doing an amazing job of talking in circles, James."

He sighed and they both laughed bitterly once more. After a pause, the white mechanical dragon spoke.

"I will make sure this one is chosen, Richard. This is the anniversary of my wife's death and my kids' birthday."

"C'mon, I'm not going to let you win out of sympathy, James."

"I know that, Richard. We're doing this to keep them from taking over the sky. Ever since man began to fly, we've known that there's something here in America's skies."

"I've heard the area they appear in has been shifting toward the

Pacific and toward Japan over the past few years, but that doesn't change the fact that we've lost a lot in the past. Or the fact that we have these craft because of what we gained from it. So, James, you need to cross yourself before this match for everyone's sake. After all, you'll be shot down before long."

"Sorry, but I already crossed myself before taking off. That leaves you. I'll protect you, so hurry it up."

"Oh, I forgot to mention. I converted to Voodoo last night. And I designated you as the sacrifice."

As they spoke, a white shadow came into view up ahead.

It was a cloud.

The two mechanical dragons spoke as they approached the white mass like it was an island.

"Richard, what will you do once we get the results today? Head back to the war?"

"I don't know, but I feel amazingly guilty. Right now, the American people, European people, and the people of the enemy nations have lost so much, but as long as I'm here, I can't share in that feeling. …I missed that latest fad."

"Don't say that. They're working to fix this world, while we…well, it seems we still aren't seeing it all clearly, but it does seem we're working to protect that world."

"Even so, James, this war that we're calling the Concept War still doesn't seem real to me. I was brought here because of my piloting prowess, but I feel I would've been better off shooting down enemy planes over the Pacific."

"I'm not sure you should feel such purpose in shooting down living human beings, Richard Thunderson."

"But I would be standing on the same stage as other human beings. Our brethren are putting their lives on the line, so I'm not sure you should call it just to be fighting dragons, James Davis."

The blue mechanical dragon gave a small laugh of self-deprecation.

"And from what I hear, we haven't found any human corpses in the cockpits of the mechanical dragons that have crashed in this world. We're fighting a world of mechanical dragons that fly on autopilot and there are no people there. The people we've lost were lost for nothing."

“No death is for nothing, Richard. Richard Thunderson.”

“Yeah,” came the lifeless response from the blue dragon as it moved down and away from the white one. “We’re talking in circles again.”

“So we are,” replied James.

“I know one thing. Today is your kids’…twins were they? Anyway, it’s their birthday. But if having your craft chosen was going to be their present, you’re going to have to console some disappointed children when you get home.”

“You made a reservation at the bar for tonight, didn’t you? Was it a cheap drink in the seat farthest back in the corner? Once you sit down, you can stoop over, say ‘congratulations James’, and return the drink to the bartender. Got it?”

As the two exchanged words, they began moving apart to the left and right.

An object was visible in front of the cloud up ahead. It was a blue airplane with a reciprocating engine.

“It begins once we pass that recordkeeping craft, James. You don’t have real bullets loaded, do you?”

“I’ve got the same as you.”

“Why do you have real bullets, you idiot!? Are you planning to have this double as a fully-equipped flight test!?”

“Why are you thinking the same thing as me, Richard?”

“Because I intend to win.”

The two of them passed the recordkeeping craft that had gone in ahead of them and they began to move to the left and right for the beginning of the test.

But in that moment, they both saw a sudden light appear.

It was a crimson light and it appeared at the midpoint between them.

The recordkeeping craft had exploded just after they passed by.

“…!?”

It broke as if struck on the center from above and it crashed into the wall of air.

Its wings broke, the body was crushed when exposed to the wind, and the small parts with little air resistance were thrown forward while trailing the smoke of the explosion.

The two mechanical dragons observed it in the small time

available and immediately moved apart. They then flew into the cloud.

"James!"

"I see it. It's him. It's that black mechanical dragon that rules this sky like it's a game. The researchers call it Tezcatlipoca the Black Sun, right? Can you see it on your radar?"

"No, it's vanished. But…"

He could see the wind moving through the cloud ahead of the two mechanical dragons.

The mass of wind split the cloud and the scattering cloud and mist showed the form of a giant dragon. It was a giant invisible dragon that existed as wind.

The white mechanical dragon moved ahead of the blue one.

"a1 to base. We have encountered the enemy. It's Black Sun. … c1 was shot down. Beginning interception."

"James, are you going after it?"

"That's the whole reason we have these mechanical dragons. I've long since resolved myself to this. Watch, Richard. I'll show you what Team A has developed. This is what we made while paving the road of development for these machines that must handle both ground and aerial battles."

As he spoke, the white mechanical dragon suddenly broke apart. However, this was not due to it being destroyed.

"Beginning transformation from normal cruising form to high-speed cruising form."

And that was precisely what the white mechanical dragon did in midair.

Its dragon-like shape crumbled and it changed.

Instead of retracting the legs like the blue one did, it solidified them as the base of the wings.

All of its joints were drawn in and it was made even smaller to reduce air resistance.

All of its accelerators were oriented toward the back.

And with metallic and mechanical noises, it all came together.

Thunderson spoke aloud what it had become.

"A fighter."

But it was still a mechanical dragon. Its shape had been warped a bit, but it was clearly a mechanical dragon transformed for aerial

combat.

The white dragon stored shimmering heat in all of its accelerators.

“Richard, your Thunderbird is an all-purpose non-transforming model because you focused on durability, but my Blanca is a high-mobility all-purpose transforming model. I can’t fly for as long as you and I don’t have as much defensive power, but I can move out ahead.”

The white dragon did exactly that while leaving behind some residual shimmering of heat.

“Hey! Wait!”

The blue dragon belatedly moved out, but it could not catch up. The mass of wind was far out ahead, the white mechanical dragon was catching up to it, and the blue mechanical dragon was left behind.

The blue one broke through the air that could only be called a wall as it attempted to keep up. Meanwhile, the white one gave a shout that shook due to the impact of piercing through the air.

“Hey, Richard.”

“What could you possibly want right now, you idiot!?”

Ahead of the blue one, a distant thick cloud enveloped the wind and the white dragon.

The giant wind dragon and the white mechanical dragon vanished from view

However, the latter’s voice could still be heard.

“Hey,” began James. “Are there others fighting like we are?”

“I hear there are in Europe. There might be in Germany and Japan as well.”

“I see,” said James. “Ohara, the first one shot down by this dragon here, was half-Japanese. He said he joined UCAT because he didn’t want to go to war with his father’s country.”

“And wasn’t Hughes, the next one shot down, part German like me? …But did you just say ‘this dragon here’!? Have you caught up, James!?”

“Yeah, I finally have. Finally. It took so long. Lyle, Essert, and Curt, who was just a kid, weren’t even able to see it, but I’ve finally, finally made it. Did you know that all of the crashed mechanical dragons we’ve recovered were shot down by this thing?”

“What!? Does that mean…?”

“Team A’s conclusion is that the world of dragons we’re up against is in a constant state of civil war between this single giant dragon and countless smaller dragons.” James laughed. “It probably comes to our skies when it’s tired of that fighting at home. And after it amuses itself by shooting down the weak machines flying here, it goes back. …I won’t let it do that again.”

The blue mechanical dragon rushed into the cloud as it listened. The cloud was blown away in front of its nose.

“Wait, James Davis. We need to work together. You understand that, don’t you? When you won over your wife, it was because I hit on her first and you went in for the attack after she shot me down. So wait.”

“I am waiting, so hurry up, Richard Thunderson. Hurry to the destination of your resolve. I’ll be moving on ahead and I’ll wait for you there.”

“Wait!”

The blue dragon accelerated through the cloud. It used all of its accelerators to their fullest and broke through the wall of air before it.

A moment later, its vision filled with a single color.

That color was blue. It saw a sky without a single cloud.

In that empty expanse of blue, the identically colored dragon looked forward.

A few hundred meters away, it saw the result of it all.

That result was destruction.

The flickering wind trailed a cloud behind it. That wind was a giant dragon and it destroyed the white mechanical dragon.

Beams of light shot between the two of them. That optical weapon could be called the dragon’s breath, but while the white one drew eight white arcs through the sky, the wind dragon fired dozens of black arcs.

The white mechanical dragon writhed in agony as the many black lights pierced into it.

“…!”

But it forced itself to circle above the wind even as it was pierced through.

Meanwhile, the wind revealed itself.

Color appeared and that color was black. A black body and black wings spread out in the blue sky.

The large black mechanical dragon was over three hundred meters long.

A flat series of cannons opened in the space between the two wings on its back. All of those cannons turned toward the white mechanical dragon circling around above it and they began to gather black light.

However, the white dragon transformed as it flew in from above.

Amid the wind, its fighter-like silhouette instantly changed from an aerial dragon to a close-quarters combat dragon.

The cannon fire and the rushing dragon crossed paths.

Even as the black light stabbed into it, the white mechanical dragon forced its way down toward the large black mechanical dragon's back.

It collided into it and raised the claws of its four legs.

"…"

But that was as far as it got.

The white dragon was destroyed. Its legs, body, and even the frame supporting its head were torn into and it could not even withstand its own next attack. The movable frame used for its transformations bent and its own heat and weight destroyed it.

It shattered like a piece of glasswork.

The white dragon raised its crying maw toward the sky.

"…!"

And it exploded.

The blue mechanical dragon soared in as if the scattering wreckage and flames were its cue.

It tried to catch up to the large black mechanical dragon that had revealed itself and that shook in the explosion.

However, the black dragon shook its body. It calmly bent its body while ignoring the air resistance of its great speed and it swept away the wreckage and smoke on its back. Once it saw the blue dragon, it opened its mouth.

At the same moment, a black light came from deep in its mouth.

This was its dragon cannon.

It produced enough light to color the blue sky black. A pillar of black light with a diameter of over a dozen meters cut horizontally

through the sky.

The sound of the scorching heat drowned out every hint of the wind.

The black dragon's light blew away all of the air as if twisting it. The surrounding clouds instantly evaporated and the black light tore into the starboard side of Thunderson's mechanical dragon.

Even so, the blue mechanical dragon was not destroyed. However, it could no longer fly.

It crashed into the pressure of the wind and was knocked through the sky as if falling forward.

From there, it could only fall.

And so it did.

With the flames of the white dragon's explosion still in the sky, the blue dragon simply fell toward the ground visible far below.

The large black dragon in the sky watched it fall. To fire the dragon cannon, it had bent its body as if curling up. Once it confirmed that the blue mechanical dragon would not fly back up, it opened its metal maw.

"——————"

Its roar filled the sky. It sounded like a crying voice and it reverberated through the blue sky.

As that sound continued, the black form vanished. It seemed to slowly but surely grow transparent. The color of the sky became visible through it, so the black dragon was dyed blue.

Afterwards, only the blue sky remained.

Down below, the mechanical dragon of the same color fell toward the ground.

That dragon let out a cry of its own.

"I will…I will…!"

It took a breath.

"I will defeat you! I swear it on the name Thunderson!"

It fell.

"I swear it!!"

終わりのクロニクル

I think I want to go somewhere
I also think I want to be somewhere
Are those the same thing?

—You may not know the answer
—However, you will not even know that unless you seek the answer

Chapter 1

“Descent of Darkness”

Something comes this way
With no footsteps
With nothing to communicate

●

A large lobby had a high ceiling and an oil painting on the wall displayed the Virgin Mary holding her child.

It was the lobby of UCAT headquarters which was disguised as IAI's transportation building.

Currently, the lobby's front window showed the darkness of night, but the inside was bright and filled with different colors.

The colors came from the decorations added to the lobby. Banners of red and white or black and white were hanging from the walls, gold paper balls and chains of colored paper hung from the ceiling, and…

"Why are there paper cranes and straw dolls, Diana?"

A gray-haired girl looked across the lobby and spoke. She had a black cat at her feet and a blue bird sitting on her head and she looked to the woman in a black suit who was decorating the empty lobby on her own.

The woman, Diana, hammered a straw doll with a red and white band around its stomach to the wall.

"Oh? In Japan, these are used to pray for a visitor's safety. You didn't know that, Brunhild?"

"I've never seen a showy tradition like this in Japan."

"That is because the Japanese are a modest people who coexist with nature. They tend not to show off this sort of celebration. From what I have read, these straw dolls are made from a natural material that is kind to nature and they are secretly hammered to trees near shrines. There even seems to be a rule about only hammering one hundred times so you don't hurt the trees. …Want to help?"

Diana turned around and pointed at a nearby work table.

Brunhild looked over and saw long nails, straw dolls, and a wooden hammer on the table.

"What is this? It has a paper attached that says Ooshiro Kazuo."

"UCAT Director Ooshiro paid for the celebratory wreaths and I still had money left over after preparing both the red and black ones, so I made these dolls as well. That one has one of his hairs in it, so it should properly represent him during the celebration."

"I see."

Brunhild nodded and walked over with doll, hammer, and nail in hand. She arbitrarily stopped in from of a red and white sotoba on a nearby wall.

“But what is the celebration for?”

“An inspector is arriving from American UCAT. Team Leviathan will soon begin the Leviathan Road for 4th-Gear and 5th-Gear, right? Well, 5th has strong connections to America.”

“They sure took their time in calling in a major player like that. The business with 3rd was finished at the end of July, but it’s already October and they’re only starting to talk about the next Leviathan Road now? The world is going to be destroyed at this rate. …Would I be right in assuming that’s because Japanese UCAT was too busy dealing with the restraints placed on them by the other UCATs?”

“Yes. You may be aged, but I see the blood is still reaching your brain.”

“Oh? That’s because I belong to a race that naturally ages slowly unlike a certain someone whose brain is wrinkling while she keeps her appearance looking young.”

Brunhild placed the straw doll on the wall and made the first strike on the nail.

“I also hear Shinjou met someone from that ridiculous group called the Army. The automaton named Gyes handed over some information on them, right? There’s that girl named Shino that I saw, the woman named Tatsumi and the mechanical dragon that showed up after the battle with 3rd, the Toda Mikoku that Shinjou met, and the man named Hajji that Gyes mentioned. What are you going to do now that they’ve shown themselves?”

Diana did not respond, so Brunhild hammered the nail again and clicked her tongue.

“Are you planning to give the inspector such a warm welcome so you can avoid that issue?”

“Sorry, but this inspector quite likes Japan even if he doesn’t show it. Once he’s here, the Leviathan Road should go quite smoothly. I don’t know the details myself, but UCAT Director Ooshiro says he will take part in the Leviathan Road with 5th-Gear.”

“What do you mean he will take part? …And who is he anyway?”

“Richard Thunderson, one of the Eight Great Dragon Kings. He is

the one who destroyed 5th-Gear. …Also, I do not know how he will take part in the negotiation. He may be an intermediary to avoid the restraints set in place by American UCAT.”

Brunhild frowned and hammered again. The nail pierced the doll, the sotoba, and then the wall behind them.

“That sounds nice, Diana, but why are you decorating for his arrival. I thought you didn’t like America.”

“I will talk about that once our guest arrives. …Or do you really want to know now?”

“Hah. The words of some elderly witch aren’t worth hearing.”

Brunhild looked away from Diana and repeatedly hammered in the straw doll. Diana did the same to her doll and Brunhild nearly lost herself in the overlapping sounds.

But then the black cat at her feet spoke.

“Brunhild, seeing this doll celebration gave me a thought. Are you sure we aren’t being gradually fooled by this entire world?”

Just as Brunhild was going to ask “about what”, someone exited the stairs leading to the lower floors.

“Tes. Diana-sama, I have gathered most of them.”

Sf placed countless straw dolls on the work table.

“I have taken hair samples from 80% of UCAT’s personnel ranked supervisor or higher and placed them inside the dolls. I have determined the blessing effect during the celebration will be extraordinary if all of these dolls are hammered to the walls.”

“Just out of curiosity, how did you take those samples?”

“Tes. I visited the individuals as they worked and took the samples.”

“I see. That’s surprisingly normal.”

“Tes. The automatons of German UCAT are very well made. To ensure I did not interrupt their work, I approached silently from behind and pulled out the sample such that it caused no pain.”

Brunhild glared at Sf and Diana approached the work table to pick up a certain doll.

“Oh? You made a doll of Itaru? Are you sure about that, Sf?”

“Tes. I explained their purpose to him and he gave me permission to take his hair sample as long as I did not use it for anything bad.”

“That isn’t what I meant. Are you sure *you* want to do this?”

“Tes. My decisions are ranked below Itaru-sama’s.”

“Is that so?” Diana’s eyes narrowed and bent as she held the Itaru doll out to Sf. “I’m giving this to you.”

“You will not be using it for the celebratory ritual?”

“Itaru told you not to use it for anything bad, right? That did not limit its use to celebration, so I am giving it to you based on my own decision.”

“Tes.” Sf nodded. “Thank you very much. I will use my Japanese-style modesty function.”

She waved her hand side to side in front of her face.

“No, no. I have determined that is not necessary. …How was that?”

“No, no. Take it. I insist.”

“Tes. I have determined that was an excellent comeback, Diana-sama. In that case, I apologize, but I will take it.”

She took the straw doll, held it in both hands, and raised it toward the ceiling.

“But what is this? The real Itaru-sama is still there. This is not him. Yet it contains a portion of him. So what is it?”

“Can you imagine it?”

Diana’s question was answered not by Sf but by Brunhild who was still hammering.

“She can’t. A machine is a machine, so it doesn’t have a person’s imagination.”

“Tes. Brunhild-sama is correct. I will activate my praise circuits.”

She placed the doll on the table and gave five expressionless claps toward Brunhild.

“I have determined that was wonderful. …How was that?”

“That was more than enough.”

Brunhild gave an annoyed sigh, placed the handle of the wooden hammer against her forehead, and thought for a moment.

“Y’know,” she began. “A complex system like imagination might be difficult for a machine, but doesn’t a machine have its own form of imagination? For example, if you want to think of the doll as that gray-haired man, how about you try identifying the doll as him? Give it his name or something.”

“Tes. I have determined that idea is based on 2nd-Gear’s concepts. But I must say that the doll does a poor job of reproducing Itaru-sama even if it is given his name. It will not function as a

replacement.”

“Don’t blame me for that,” said Brunhild. “Okay, we don’t have to worry about the definition. Just answer me this: do you want to throw away that doll or do you want to keep it? If you want to throw it away, I’ll burn it right here. If you want to keep it, then take good care of it.”

Hearing that, Sf looked at the straw doll on the table. She picked it up, held it up, and hugged it thrice.

“Tes. Understood. I have determined I should place it in a vacuum-sealed vault to store it unquestionably safely.”

Brunhild saw Diana smile bitterly.

She also felt something tap her leg. She looked down and saw the cat looking up at her.

“I need to reconsider my opinion of you, Brunhild.”

She kicked it away with her heel and began hammering once more.

Amid the noise, the doll hugging a doll spoke.

“Come to think of it, the guest should have arrived already.”

A short silence followed.

“I wonder where he is.”

●

It was night.

Below the dark sky was an expanse of land containing mountains and a city.

However, there was one odd thing about the city constructed between the mountains.

An area with a diameter of a few hundred meters stretching from the city’s northwest edge to the center was surrounded by a slight shadow. Also, the shadow was too faint to see without looking closely.

It was a concept space.

That alternate space was created by altering a portion of reality and recreating reality inside. But in most cases, the inside would be deserted and the electricity and water pipes would be cut off.

Not a single light illuminated the city and the cars on the main road had lost their drivers and come to a stop after either hitting each other or running up onto the sidewalk.

Even the traffic signals had lost their light, so they were nothing but obstacles. A red car had crashed into the base of one signal and the sign hanging from it indicated this was the city of Akigawa.

Two sets of footsteps travelled below that sign and to the south.

One was the sound of light shoes and the other was the sound of leather shoes with one leg dragging a bit.

The two who were running south along the dark road were a girl and an old man.

The girl's shoulder-length blonde hair was illuminated by the light of the real nighttime scenery outside the concept space. She ran but soon looked over her shoulder. Her eyebrows twisted a little over her blue eyes.

"————?"

The words she spoke were in English and her appeal of a question was directed at the old man who was dragging his right leg. His gray hair was cut short, he was tall, and he too had blue eyes.

He nodded and looked around the area. They were in the center of the two-lane road. Nearby, a white sedan was stopped by the curb of the sidewalk.

The old man dragged his leg and shook the bottom of his summer coat as he slowly approached the white sedan. The driver's side window was open and he spotted the key in the ignition.

He further peered inside, corrected the position of the gear shift and hand brake, and turned the key.

But the car did not react. He turned the key a few more times, but it would not start.

"…"

He slowly muttered something to the girl.

"…?"

She repeated his words as a question and he nodded after moving away from the car. He narrowed his eyes and looked across the sky with his right hand in his pocket. There was a division between inside and outside the concept space. The border was marked by the line along which the low clouds and shimmering of heat came to an end.

They currently stood on the southern side of the dome-shaped concept space.

After confirming that, he sighed.

He removed his hand from his pocket, looked to the girl, and spoke a name instead of more English.

“Heo.”

The girl looked up and the old man held his right hand toward her and opened it.

A wristwatch sat on his palm. It was large, undecorated, and old. The original blue and white coloring had peeled off and the brass frame now dully reflected the light.

However, the watch was functioning even in the concept space, including the red dial below the hours, minutes, and seconds hands.

Five letters were currently displayed on that odometer-style red dial: ACCEL.

The girl named Heo tilted her head even further when she saw those letters, but the old man only smiled back. He said something and pushed his palm even further toward her.

Heo hesitated, but she finally reached for the old man’s watch.

She gave him one last questioning look and finally took it once he nodded.

She then followed his instructions by placing the watch around her slender left wrist, turning the stem, and manipulating it in a few other ways.

The meter dial displayed a series of letters, five at a time.

NEWRI DERSE TUP!!

After seeing that text, the old man raised his hand and pointed to the south.

Heo’s shoulders trembled and she shook her head.

“——————”

He spoke and brought a hand just beneath her neck.

She wore a necklace made of stones around her skinny neck. It was missing a few stones, but Thunderson called her name as he touched it. When he spoke next, he no longer spoke English.

“You learned this piece-of-shit and pain-in-the-ass language from me and your teacher, right?”

“Y-yes. I don’t think it’s a piece of shit, though.”

“I see. We can’t have that, Heo. This language is used by shitty people. It is loved by an insincere and deceptive bastard who pretends to be evil and a mountain ape that loves martial arts.”

“I don’t think you can blame people for using their native

language."

"Heo is making excuses!" The old man looked up to the sky with a hand over his eyes and he sighed. "Where did I go wrong in teaching you!? Now how am I supposed to face the parents who left you with me?"

"Um, g-great-grandfather? Y-you're right. It is a piece of shit, isn't it!? I understand, so please stop lamenting and preparing to lecture me."

"I see, I see. As long as you understand that this country is a piece of shit."

Satisfaction filled the old man's face and he nodded, but Heo was already hanging her head and speaking to herself.

"I'm sorry, mother, father. I just used a bad word. I'm sorry, teacher. I just lied. I'm sorry, god. It felt kind of refreshing."

"What are you muttering about, Heo? You were just telling it like it is. Say it proud." He lightly patted her on the back. "Well, you'll be using that language in this country until you get sick of it or don't like it, Heo. Here, I'm sure you'll be able to say goodbye to all the moving around and transferring to new schools."

"B-but, great-grandfather, I thought I was only coming here to visit my father's grave and maybe get some information on my great-uncle if we're lucky. …What is this? What's pursuing us?"

"Our luck ran out once we arrived in this country that you left ten years ago. This pain-in-the-ass country must have taken a liking to the family of thunder."

"You mean…"

"It's a premonition, Heo. Sounds like nonsense, doesn't it?"

Heo was left speechless by how definitively he said it, but he puffed out his chest and continued.

"Premonitions are great. The one's that excite you are the best."

"I only have bad ones."

"Then there must be something wrong with your brain."

"G-great-grandfather, you sometimes need to be more careful how you phrase things."

"Don't worry about it. I had a time like that long ago. A time when everything looked bad and made me uneasy."

He maintained his smile and pointed to the south with his chin.

"Go on ahead, Heo. You like running, right? You missed the last

athletic festival when you transferred schools, but I think this country's one is coming up soon. Go enter at the last minute and take first place. I'll be right behind you."

"…"

"What is it?"

"I don't want to go without you."

The old man smiled again when he heard that.

"Don't worry. I'll have this dealt with before long and then I'll be right behind you. Have you ever seen me lose in a fight?"

She shook her head and he pulled something from his summer coat.

It was a grip with a double-edged blade attached to the end. The grip was made of a hard white material, but with a swing of his right hand, it extended into a spear.

He saw Heo's eyes open wide and he clenched his teeth in a smile.

"This is your first time seeing this, isn't it? The leader of a group I belonged to sixty years ago taught me some techniques. I've only used it to plow some fields lately, but I can probably still tear into steel."

"Great-grandfather… You look like a dangerous person."

"Is that so? I guess you still can't recognize the charm. …But you'll understand eventually."

"I-I don't think I really need to."

"Heo isn't listening to me!"

It took an entire minute for Heo to calm the old man.

Afterwards, he lowered his shoulders and looked behind him to the north.

"It's about time," he muttered before turning back to Heo. "Everything you see here will be new to you and also the truth, but it would take too long to explain any of it. I'll do the explaining when we meet again, Heo. I'll also explain about the mother and father who gave you your name. …Oh, right. We need a rendezvous point."

"The embassy?"

"No, it's possible they've sent people there. Spend the night in a business hotel or somewhere like that. You have money, don't you? And we can meet up… There was a cemetery we passed on the way here today, remember? Was it called the Nishitama Cemetery?

We'll meet at its entrance at 2 PM."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow. And I may need to shake pursuit and contact some people, so return at the same time for three days if I'm not there. If I still haven't arrived after three days, go to IAI in Okutama, show them that watch, and tell them this."

His words filled the air.

終わりのクロニクル

“Show me to UCAT, you pieces of shit.”

“…”

However he may have interpreted the drooping of her shoulders, the old man reached out his left hand and rubbed her head.

Next, he grabbed her shoulders, pointed her to the south, and patted those shoulders.

But what he said afterwards was not her name or an instruction to go.

“——————”

It was some kind of name.

However, it contained the intent to take care of something. He spoke it as if checking on something and Heo hesitantly looked over her shoulder.

“Great-grandfather, what was that?”

“The name of a friend. The friend who taught me the meaning of your name, Heo.”

He looked up into the sky with a smile. The Evening Star shined in the southwestern sky.

Just as Heo looked to the sky as well, a wind blew in. It was a nighttime north wind.

The chilly current of air washed over her in an instant and she narrowed her eyes.

She then heard the old man speak.

“So the north wind is supporting the child of thunder. Then this journey is sure to be a new experience. Heo, your great-grandfather promises you one thing: we will meet again very soon.”

“Y-you really promise?”

“Yes.”

Hearing his agreement, she moved forward.

She began hesitantly, but she leaned forward without turning back and she began to run.

“Go ahead!”

Hearing the old man’s shout, she accelerated.

●

The old man gave a sigh as he watched Heo leave.

He saw her skinny and small back vanish down the dark road.

“Is this the last piece of atonement I can do for you after you died

sixty years ago, James? If possible, I wanted to be her great-grandfather…and find your other child."

Holding the spear, he turned to the north where footsteps approached.

The source of the footsteps came into view.

It was just one person and he stared at the slender person in a gray combat coat.

"What, just one?"

As he spoke, he thought. Most likely, he and Heo had been accompanied by disguised guards from Japanese and American UCAT on their way here. This single person had reached them through all of those guards and expanded the concept space to capture them inside.

"This looks like it'll be a pain. …To get right to the point, you're from the Army, aren't you? You haven't done much in America, so I take it your base is in this country."

The person stopped their approach but did not answer his question.

They were approximately fifteen meters away on the road and they wore their coat's hood over their head. Their hands were empty, but their stance allowed them to move at any time.

The coat-wearing figure then asked a question in a female voice.

"You are Richard Thunderson, correct?"

"Now that's a terrible pronunciation. It's even worse than the mountain apes I met sixty years ago. …What is this about? No, I'm sure you're here for 5th-Gear's Concept Core. You want me to tell you where it is, don't you?"

"…"

Thunderson took her silence as a yes.

"I hear the Army attacked Japanese UCAT and took a peek inside their databank a while back. You supposedly weren't able to take everything in the core back with you, but you should have seen a good bit. For example, you should now know that the half of 5th-Gear's Concept Core in Japanese UCAT's possession is inside a mechanical dragon weapon."

"But we did not know what that weapon is. And let me tell you one thing. The Army already has an excellent mechanical dragon. We have no interest in acquiring 5th-Gear technology."

“You mean…that mechanical dragon uses 5th-Gear technology? How did you get it?”

“I do not need to tell you that. I will be the one asking the questions. Also, the Army will be the one to win. We are already on the verge of developing a new weapon that uses a god of war’s remote control system. We simply want to know the identity of your weapon.”

The coat-wearing figure removed her hood and a girl with sharp features appeared from below.

“I am Toda Mikoku and I am here for that answer. The Army knows how to choose which enemies it fights. If you hand over the information, I will do nothing to you.”

●

Mikoku observed the old man facing her.

His name was Richard Thunderson. He was around 180 cm tall, he was armed with a spear, and his leg was injured. He would be unable to move too intensely, but his height gave his arms and spear a decent reach and he was one of the Eight Great Dragon Kings of the former National Defense Department.

She assumed his spear was a concept weapon, but she was armed with a single Japanese sword. He definitely outdid her in reach and, even if her sword was well-made, it was only a Low-Gear one Hajji had bought.

…All of the Army’s weapons are currently on their way to Takao.

The factory manager and his men were spending sleepless nights modifying all of the weapons. They were using the slight information stolen from UCAT and methods they had come up with themselves.

Mikoku had defeated a few disguised UCAT bodyguards on her way here. She had caught almost all of them by surprise, but she still had a few injuries.

…And the old man in front of me must be a lot stronger than those bodyguards.

Every factor seemed to be against her, so the sword felt heavy at her waist, both physically and otherwise.

She told herself not to let her guard down while she faced Thunderson.

“Will you answer or not?”

But he responded with a question of his own.

"You said your name is Toda, didn't you?"

"…Yes, what about it?"

"What is your mother's name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"You don't feel like answering?"

"No, I do not. And I think I will pretend I don't know."

Mikoku gave a bitter laugh in her heart as if she had just remembered something.

…He must be thinking something similar.

She came to an odd sense of understanding.

If their thoughts were the same, it actually meant there was something about her that was different from him.

With an internal nod at that thought, she drew the sword from her right hip below her coat.

"Well? Will you answer or only ask questions of your own?"

She then received her answer.

She first sensed wind blowing next to her right ear. The subsequent sensation of cloth told her what was happening. The right side of her hood had been cut away.

But she had not taken her eyes off of Thunderson. The tall old man rotated the spear once in a single hand.

"My spear can pierce even steel."

"Are you proud of piercing something more easily pierced than a human?"

She stepped forward and the next attack arrived as her footstep rang from the asphalt.

It was wind and it was aimed at the center of her chest, the core of a human body.

Before it hit, she maintained her step forward but collapsed the rest of her body forward.

The wind stabbed by above her lowered head.

To support her collapsing body, she moved forward. She ran along the asphalt with the same motions as running up a wall.

"…!"

She approached Thunderson from low to the ground.

By spinning his spear around and thrusting it forward, he could hold back his opponent and keep his distance, but there was a

common fear with any bladed weapon: hitting the blade against the ground or a wall.

If the blade struck something hard, it would stop one's attacking motion and possibly chip the blade. A spear's long grip was good for swinging it around in the air, but it was especially difficult to use around the limited area at one's feet.

As Mikoku approached from low down, Thunderson stepped back with his unhurt leg to put some space between them.

A moment later, Mikoku leaped. She saw he held the spear in his right hand, so she leaped to her own right.

As they passed by each other, she passed her sword to her left hand and moved to his right and behind him.

She then turned around while slashing behind her with her left hand.

The silver line raced through the air and toward Thunderson's back as he took his step back.

But the blade she had sent out as a counter was deflected with a metallic noise.

"!?"

She looked and saw he had held the spear vertically and rotated it around to the center of his back.

Her sword had struck the grip and that white grip with "Northwind" printed on it had powerfully deflected the blade. As her sword was tossed back, she could not immediately prepare it for another attack.

…Damn!

As if pulled back by the deflected sword, she moved away from Thunderson.

However, he twisted his body toward her. He rotated using one leg as the axis and he swung the spear.

There was wind.

"…"

Mikoku had to make a decision. Would she lower her hips to take the attack or would she flee? Choosing the latter proved to have been the correct decision.

When she leaped to the right, a pale white line ran through the spot she had just been in.

…Is that the true form of the wind?

Before she could finish thinking, she heard a dull sound behind her.

Next, the movement of the air told her something had happened there.

One of the concrete telephone poles on the roadside was cut at its base.

It collapsed and brought the surrounding power lines with it.

Once the pole collapsed, she would have to escape to the left or right. The power lines would likely eliminate the front or back as options.

She instead chose to move forward before the pole could fully collapse.

But then Thunderson cried out.

“Stand back!”

“What!?” she shouted back.

She slipped below the collapsing telephone pole and escaped to the side. She heard the sound of destruction as the concrete pole fell onto the asphalt.

“Why are you telling me to stand back!? Do you think I can leave empty-…”

She trailed off before saying “handed”.

She had realized why he had told her to stand back.

A certain presence had suddenly approached. It felt like a great pressure that weighed down on the air.

“What is that!?”

And then it arrived.

- —**Everything falls.**

It was a voice.

Specifically, it was the voice of a text added to the concept space.

●

Thunderson felt the true form of the voice.

He spoke to the girl named Mikoku who stood at a distance.

“Leave, Army girl. Playtime is over. My enemy has arrived. …You felt something in that concept text, didn’t you?”

The girl who was clearly cautious of her surroundings nodded

after a short pause.

"You called this your enemy. …Is this change to the wind caused by that enemy?"

"Yes," muttered Thunderson.

As she had said, the flow of wind in the area was odd. The wind had been blowing from the north earlier, but something like a disturbed air current was circling around the area.

It was as if something giant existed in front of him to the north.

Mikoku seemed to realize that because she looked northward.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Leave," he muttered with raised eyebrows.

He then looked up to see the shape of the sky changing. The domed roof surrounding them was disappearing. In its place, the current in the sky was creating an invisible cylindrical wall with a diameter of several kilometers.

The previous added text was remaking the concept space.

"So you really have recovered after being shot down sixty years ago. And you're pursuing your enemy."

He took a defensive stance toward the empty darkness to the north and he saw the air tremble.

It happened on a large scale. It went beyond the cars stopped nearby and shook the air over several dozen meters.

He heard Mikoku taking a defensive stance within that pressure.

She has good instincts, he thought with a bitter smile.

And so he took action. He took a light step with one leg and moved toward her.

"…"

She looked blankly at him, but he was unsure if she was questioning the fact that he had easily approached before she could do anything or if she was questioning what was going to happen.

However…

"Gives you a nice premonition, doesn't it?"

He knocked her away with the bottom of his spear.

…Girls really are light.

As she gasped, she rose several meters and flew through the air as if being carried. She vanished into the darkness on a smaller road running alongside the main one.

After a moment, she could be heard landing on her feet and

speaking in the darkness.

"Damn you!"

"Leave! And tell them that 5th-Gear's Concept Core is looking forward to fighting you."

"Is the entire Concept Core with UCAT?"

"No," he answered as he turned from the smaller road to the north. "But the family of thunder will acquire it under the name of happiness."

He took a low stance, held the spear tightly, and faced the presence that rose like a mountain in the darkness.

"Let's resume this sixty-year-old battle, Black Sun. My final weapon is the spear of my dead commander, but it should be enough for you."

The darkness moved as if responding to his words.

And then something appeared within the wind as if the empty darkness was melting away.

It was a giant black form. Not only did it fill the road, but it stretched far into the distance.

Thunderson smiled as he spoke to it.

"Come, Black Sun. I will show you the destination of my resolve. And this time, you will lose once and for all. …To be honest, there's a lot I'm uneasy about, but I'm sure the descendants of Sayama and the others will find the answer using my final riddle. They will find the answer of happiness."

He held the spear even tighter, clenched his teeth, and continued speaking.

"My thunder is swift, the stars watch over it all, and the north wind can pierce even a dragon."

Chapter 2

“The Pair’s Pace”

I will walk with you
That is a promise
But it is such a natural thing that I will keep that promise without even trying

●

The many-colored lights for a night game lit up the schoolyard.

The sandy area extended for a kilometer in each direction and the lighting produced a certain level of mood.

Simple green spectator seating was set up between the lights and the schoolyard was divided into eight sections.

Food stands, an entrance gate, and an exit gate had been built along that schoolyard.

The entrance gate said “Taka-Akita Academy 60th Athletic Festival” and the first school building bordering that schoolyard had hanging banners saying “7 days until the festival begins” and “14 days until the post-festival party”.

People were scattered around the schoolyard where those hanging banners were visible.

Most of them wore track suits and the armbands of the athletic festival committee and they were redrawing the lines on the schoolyard, reaffixing the simple spectator seating, or placing signs for local sponsors on the food stands.

The 100 meter dash and the 400 meter one lap line required especially long white lines, so they were very carefully redrawing or adding to the lines.

Two students were redrawing the lines near the first school building. The one drawing the fourth lane had long hair with a ribbon and the one drawing the fifth lane wore a suit and had his hair slicked back. The two of them walked while rolling the line carts behind them.

The one with long hair spoke to the boy in a suit walking next to her.

“Sayama-kun, the student council does a lot of things, doesn’t it? I never thought we would help prepare for the athletic festival.”

“Shinjou-kun, is this your first time for this kind of event?” asked Sayama with Baku on his head.

Shinjou nodded with a smile.

“Even when UCAT had some special recreation, it was always a one day thing. Also, everyone would pretty quickly gather together and decide the match with a fistfight. Are those the official rules for soccer and baseball?”

“What kind of sports are the soccer and baseball you are talking about?”

“In soccer, you can’t use your hands, but in baseball, you can use a bat.”

“And what would you be using them on?”

“Your opponent’s bodies. …In soccer, you can only hit their head with a headbutt, right?”

“Ha ha ha. Going to such physical humor so quickly? You are surprisingly extreme, Shinjou-kun. There are some sports I need to show you on TV sometime. One involves kicking a ball and the other involves hitting a ball with a stick.”

“Thanks. Anyway, I never knew the lines of a sports field were drawn with lime. Some of the white powder got in my nose earlier and I started feeling kind of funny.”

Sayama nodded while thinking he could use that last sentence in one of his edited audio recordings.

They walked on and their lines bent along the outer edge of the schoolyard. They could see the spectator seating, the food stands, and the signs for local store sponsors.

“The pieces of art from past graduates are over there,” pointed out Shinjou as she turned around. “I’ve been wondering. Why is there a collection of memorials there?”

“Oh, about twenty years ago, the graduates made super-realistic sand pictures of themselves. They lined them up and gave them black borders made from carbon to protect them from the elements, but oddly enough, local residents and the Buddhist society keep bringing offerings of flowers and water. Wonderful, isn’t it?”

“I think it’s more ominous than it is wonderful.”

“It is not ominous. The alumni association was afraid it would seem that way, so they have recently been making alterations. At night, a few of them will randomly appear to smile and their eyes will glow.”

“That’s plenty creepy.”

Shinjou sighed and looked toward Sayama.

“I know it’s a bit late to ask, but why are you wearing a suit, Sayama-kun?”

“This is my athletic suit, so there is nothing at all strange about-… What is with that look, Shinjou-kun?”

"I was just wondering what to do when someone has the very foundations wrong."

"Now that you bring it up, should you be wearing a track suit? Given the time…"

"I have Sadame's body right now, but…I'm fine. I changed clothes and I'm getting more used to going outside. I sometimes go out without disguising my chest, so I do wonder if I'm getting too careless."

"That means you are able to relax, Shinjou-kun. But if you ever need something to cover your chest, just tell me. I will use my own two hands to help calm you down."

"Right, right."

She averted her gaze while nodding, but she kept her right hand on her chest.

She began walking once more and Sayama silently followed.

After a moment, she spoke up while lowering her head.

"Um, Sayama-kun? Preparing for the athletic festival is fun and all, but…"

"Is this about the Leviathan Road?"

"Eh? Oh… Th-there is that. And there's also the person from the Army I met. …W-well, both of those things are actually more important and this may be sudden, but…"

She slowed her pace and she lowered her head enough for her bangs to hide her face.

"You haven't been checking on my body lately."

"I see. So to put it logically, you are asking to do it right here and now."

"How is that logical!?"

"Calm down, calm down," he said after she shouted at him and turned her red face toward him.

It was true they had not had much free time with the preparations in the morning and evening and the festival committee members or Izumo and the others stopping by their room.

…When you add in the time she needs to write her novel, we have to get to sleep right away.

She seemed to have made it past the plot stage of her novel because she was building up the setting on the library computer while either writing "good" or throwing out the data. That was

important too, but…

"It is true we have not had much time for just the two of us lately."

"Yeah…but I'm sorry. I'm talking about myself when the Leviathan Road is more important."

"The old man seems to be preparing the preliminary negotiations for 4th and 5th. Richard Thunderson of the Eight Great Dragon Kings is even supposed to arrive today as American UCAT's inspector. I assume it is to help the negotiations with 5th run more smoothly. …But for now, what is it you wish to discuss about your body?"

Shinjou stopped walking and stood with the monument-like pieces of art behind her.

"Neither body is working. The other day, I just got a stomachache again. Am I really making any progress?"

"I see," said Sayama again.

He stopped the line cart next to him and folded his arms while Baku mimicked him on his head. But before he could say anything, Shinjou spoke again.

"I-is the boy side getting in the way?"

"You mean Setsu-kun's body? I would like to know why you think that."

"Because…" She too let go of the cart and lightly held her own body. "Well… there's something I don't really understand. Um? Sayama-kun, will you tell me?"

"I will answer any question for you, Shinjou-kun. All truth and knowledge lies within me."

"Oh? Then what's the truth behind the Kennedy assassination?"

"There are times when a man cannot restrain himself any longer."

"That is not it and you know it!!"

That shouted response came not from Shinjou but somewhere much further away, so Sayama looked up.

He looked to Shinjou, but she was shaking her head with a look of surprise. She was saying it had not been her.

He waited for a few seconds, but he heard nothing more beyond the distant hammering of students constructing stands and the distant shouts of sports teams practicing.

"Was that shout a special function added to the graduates' self-

portraits? Well, it does not matter. Shinjou-kun, what is it you wish to ask me?"

"Oh, right. Well, a man and a woman can make a baby, right? Oh, and I know how, so you don't have to explain it."

"Hm. That last bit is certainly disappointing."

"Yes, yes. Very disappointing. Now, about my question."

She took in a breath, paused for a few seconds, and spoke clearly while blushing.

"H-how do two boys make a baby?"

As soon as the question left her lips, two odd sounds of impact came from behind her.

Sayama looked over and found two people collapsed in the schoolyard behind the self-portraits.

"Why are you two lying on the ground there, Kazami, Izumo?"

●

Kazami came to when she heard her name.

She could see the nighttime schoolyard turned on its side and two people standing on it.

She wondered who they were and she eventually found the answer: Sayama and Shinjou.

She then questioned why she was on the ground.

"Did Shinjou-kun's challenging question give the two of you anemia?"

That question brought her back to her senses.

She frantically stood up and walked over to Sayama without brushing the sand off of her track suit.

"J-just a moment, Sayama!"

She kicked Izumo's head to wake him as she walked over and Shinjou was the one to react. Her shoulders shook as if in fear.

"Oh… Kazami-san, did you hear that?"

"Yes, we were swapping out the self-portraits' voice ROMs from vengeful spirit to invigorating cheering. …But what is this all of a sudden, Shinjou?"

"Well," said Shinjou.

She lowered her head and brought a hand to her chest, but…

"…"

She hesitated. Kazami had a pretty good guess what this was

about, but she chose to say something else instead.

"If you think saying it will help resolve it, you should say it."

"Right," said Shinjou quietly before finally taking a few breaths. "Um… I still don't have my period and the boy side still can't reach the very end like Sayama-kun can. But…a girl can carry a baby, right?"

"Yes, even I can do that."

"Chisato! You've finally decided to- gwoh!"

She silenced the voice on the ground by kicking over the line cart with her heel and then she placed a hand on Shinjou's shoulder.

She then realized the girl's trembling was reaching her palm.

Still trembling, Shinjou lowered the ends of her eyebrows and looked back and forth between Kazami and Sayama. Her damp eyes shook a bit and narrowed as she opened her trembling mouth.

"But… Even if I can carry a baby as a girl, what happens during the day when I'm a boy?"

"…"

"If I return to a boy during the day, the baby will disappear. So if…um.…two boys can't make a baby together, I…um…"

Kazami saw her head lower further as she spoke.

"I looked into it. But I couldn't find anything saying if it was possible or not. …If nothing says it isn't possible, then it might be possible, right? So today, I worked up my courage and asked a girl from our class, but she said I should ask Sayama-kun instead. So… um…"

終わりのクロニクル

"Shinjou."

She stopped speaking when Kazami called her name. She looked on the verge of tears.

Before the dam holding in her emotions could burst, Kazami motioned Sayama over.

"Hey, Shinjou," she began. "Do you not like your current body?"

After a pause, Shinjou shook her head and took a rough breath.

"I stopped rejecting it."

Kazami breathed a mental sigh of relief at that.

That meant Shinjou's worry was a simple matter. Unlike before, she did not have a problem with the way she was.

…She wants both Sadame and Setsu to become proper adults, but she's afraid that will cause problems.

That was the fear that had led her to discuss something that would overturn the workings of the world such as having a child between two boys.

Kazami found it cute, but Shinjou herself was completely serious.

"I see," she said despite not knowing what exactly she meant. She then tapped Sayama on the shoulder. "Listen. Give the answer you need to give and then have a nice discussion about the future."

"I understand."

He was as expressionless as ever and Kazami felt relieved enough to take a step away.

He approached Shinjou and grabbed both her shoulders.

She gave a start and finally looked up. She looked straight ahead with tears gathering in her eyes, but Sayama was not shaken.

"Shinjou-kun, please listen. You seem to be worried that Setsu-kun and I would be unable to have a child together, but…"

"Y-yeah?"

Sayama gave his answer.

"I can make it happen."

An instant later, Kazami felt her vision falling into darkness once more.

"…"

She had the contradictory sensation of losing all her senses and her mind recovered with the rising feeling of waking from a dream.

Her mind was initially filled with confusion.

…Huh? What was I just doing?

It was an odd feeling.

She recalled having heard something strange, but she could not quite remember what it was.

There was also something strange about her vision. She had previously been standing in the schoolyard at night, so why was she leaning against a wall now?

Wondering what the wall was, she touched it. It felt strange.

…Is this…?

What she had thought was a wall was the schoolyard, so she had to have collapsed at some point.

She suddenly realized someone was shaking her and calling out to her.

“Hey! Chisato! Chisato! Are you okay!?”

…This is hopeless.

As she listened to Izumo’s voice, she realized her body and mind were not linking up properly.

Simply put, she had taken some form of serious mental damage.

But then…

“Chisato, wake up! Fine. If that’s how it’s gonna be, I’ll use this chance to feel up those breasts in publi-…”

Fighting instincts unrelated to her mind sent her fist flying.

It struck and the impact travelled through her fist to her wrist, arm, shoulder, and then brain. The impacts of one, two, three, and then four punches connected her mind to her body and her senses returned with the fifth blow.

“Oh, I’ve woken up. …Huh? Kaku? Why are you so bloody?”

She got up and looked at Izumo who lay collapsed before her, but he was breathing.

After concluding he had fallen asleep, she stood up.

The shock had mixed up her memories a little. She did not remember what had happened while she had been collapsed, but she doubted it was anything worthwhile.

She lightly tapped her dizzy head and turned to Sayama and Shinjou.

Shinjou was crying while Sayama held her in his arms.

“…”

Kazami silently lowered her shoulders as she realized Shinjou had understood that Sayama was lying. Or that he was fully intent on

doing it but did not have a foundation for his confidence this time.

…But she does have someone to support her like that.

Kazami gave a small smile, but then electronic tones came from the pockets of the three who stood on the schoolyard.

They came from their cell phones and there was only one reason all three of them would get a call at the same time.

“UCAT?” she asked.

Sayama was the first one to act. He first looked across the others.

“It is me.”

And he answered his black cell phone.

After a moment, he gave an expressionless comment.

“A strange concept space has appeared to the north of Akigawa?”

●

The city of Akigawa was divided by a few roads running east to west through its center.

One of those was the main road that ran through Taka-Akita Academy and the JR Itsukaichi Line was just south of it.

Crossing the Itsukaichi Line and continuing south brought one to a gentle slope leading down to the Aki River.

An apartment building was located in a residential district halfway down that sloped area. It was a beige mortar apartment building with a bamboo grove behind it, it looked quite old, and it was incredibly dirty.

It bordered the road to its north and had a small gravel space instead of a parking lot.

Light and noise arrived at the eastern end of that dry gravel. They were the headlight and engine of a motorcycle.

Three tires could be heard digging into the gravel: the motorcycle’s front and back wheels and the sidecar’s one wheel.

The headlight illuminated the front of a room with a nameplate saying Harakawa. Below it, the names Yui and Dan were given side by side.

The motorcycle’s engine shut off and the person riding it stepped down. He was a boy wearing a black leather jacket, a T-shirt, and black jeans.

He did not wear a helmet and only a bandanna held down his

messy hair. He brushed his dark fingers through that hair and took his bag from the sidecar.

"I'm home."

He put a key in the green steel door and pushed it open.

The space inside was darker than the night outside, but the boy, Dan Harakawa, entered regardless.

He flipped the switch next to the door and light filled the inside.

The kitchen extended to his right and a living room was located directly ahead. There were no furnishings besides the TV and stereo in a corner of the living room and a table.

He closed the door behind him.

"?"

He noticed a piece of paper stuck in the door's mail slot, so he took it out.

"Oh, it's from Ooki-sensei. She's telling me to come to class again, isn't she? Did she actually stop by my house? What a pain. And her handwriting's hard to read too."

Despite his words, he had a small smile on his lips. However, he gently suppressed the expression.

"I suppose I'm a pain too."

He tossed his bag to the side of the kitchen.

As he listened to the sounds of the books and metal components inside hitting the ground, he heard another odd sound.

It came from the door behind him and it sounded like something had hit it, so he tilted his head.

…Is it that cat? Is it begging for food again?

With a practiced motion, he slowly opened the door while using it as a shield.

And he found what had hit the door.

Rather than a cat, it was a girl.

She had collapsed and was curled up in the small cement space in front of the door.

Her short blonde hair spilled onto the damp cement and took some of the ground's color with it.

"Is she from the base?"

Dan thought about the American military's Yokota Air Base where he worked part time. However, even if the base was in the neighboring town of Fussa, that was still five kilometers away. Not

many of the people connected to the base lived in Akigawa and he had never even seen a girl with such noticeably blonde hair around Fussa.

…I've never seen her while at work either.

"Hey," he called out while crouching down, but she did not react.

Even in the dark night, he could tell her slender face was not looking good and she was sweating quite a bit. He guessed that she was dehydrated.

Just as he began to reenter the apartment to get some water, he saw a small movement from her hand.

Her slender right hand reached toward him in the still night and he heard her voice. At first she spoke in English that he could not quite catch, but then…

"Help me…"

He responded to her Japanese words with an action. He reached out and held her hand. He squeezed to tell her he was there.

"Don't worry."

The girl turned toward his words.

She slowly tilted her head and opened her blue eyes a bit in surprise. Something in her eyes that could have been sweat or tears caused their blue to waver.

She took in a breath and gave a small nod toward Harakawa.

But that was as far as she got. As if she finally found herself able to relax, her strength left her, her eyes closed, and her head dropped down.

She had passed out.

"Hey," called out Harakawa, but she did not respond.

She merely took long, rhythmical breaths with no strength in her body. She seemed to be sleeping.

He let go of her hand, saw that strength did not return to that hand, slowly sat down on the entranceway floor, and sighed.

"What a pain. What do you mean 'save me'? You could at least give your name."

He looked at the girl and rested his chin on his hand.

"A cat would've been better than this."

●

Far above the nighttime ocean, an object flew above the clouds in

a place too high to even call the sky.

It was an airplane.

The gently-curved, white passenger plane was made in Japan.

The flight had left the west coast of the United States and was crossing the Pacific Ocean to reach Japan. As it flew through the night, lights could be seen through the windows on the side and the interior was visible.

The economy class seats were aligned with three sets of three to a row and the plane was preparing for a late dinner.

Most of the passengers were Japanese on the way back from touring, but two foreigners sat next to the right wing. One was an elderly man in the window seat and the other was a young man sleeping in the center seat.

The young man in a suit was sleeping with a blanket pulled up to his shoulders, but he woke to the sound of the flight attendant bringing dinner. He bowed to the woman who passed a dinner tray to the elderly man further in.

“How much longer?” he asked in fluent Japanese.

The woman answered “about three hours” in English.

At the same time, the plane shook slightly. However, it shook vertically rather than horizontally.

The man’s body floated up into the air a bit and then the plane shook to the left.

“We seem to have hit some turbulence. I apologize.”

The flight attendant spoke calmly, but she spoke Japanese this time. By the time she finished speaking, the plane had made it out on top of the air and only had the normal vibration of an airplane.

The surrounding people grew a bit noisier. It was partially due to dinner arriving, but it also seemed someone’s food had fallen from the tray in the turbulence. The bread also fell from the tray held out to the young man.

The flight attendant apologized and also spoke to the elderly man in English.

“Sir, is yours okay?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Nothing to worry about.”

The young man heard the elderly man reply in English. After receiving a replacement tray and placing it on the simple table he opened in front of him, he turned to the elderly man.

The elderly man wore a suit, had thin hair, and had a tall and slender build. He was currently eating while looking out the window.

The food on his tray showed no sign of having moved during the turbulence.

Just as the young man was about to talk to him, the elderly man grabbed the bread and spoke.

“Roger, Roger. This bread is really bad. Why is it so damp?”

The young man, Roger, shrugged at the English words spoken without even looking at him.

“I believe that is Japanese bread, Colonel Odor. According to my research, this flight’s food was supplied by IAI and I suspect this is their new bread meant for the Japanese. It is called ‘Eat My Soft Skin Bread’.”

“Such a ridiculous, ridiculous culture of copying others Japan has! What do you think of the flavor?”

“Well, the outside is crunchy and the inside is spongy, but it seems to me the outside would need to be the soft part to count as ‘soft skin’.”

“Roger, Roger. How can you know that when you haven’t eaten it yet?”

“A silly question. I can deduce it all from the information available to me.”

“Then…then what about this, Roger? Deduce when I’m going to die.”

“I do not have much information on you, Colonel Odor. A delusion with an unsatisfactory basis would only lower your confidence in me, so I can deduce that I would be better off not doing so.”

With a quick laugh, the elderly man called Odor stopped looking out the window. He cut the bread in his hand with a knife and spoke once more.

“Roger, Roger. Tell me what information you gathered while asleep. Tell me what our mission is.”

“Very well. Major General Richard Thunderson, the American Leviathan Road inspector sent ahead of us by American UCAT, and Miss Heo Thunderson, his great-granddaughter, have gone missing. We were to meet up with them as assistant inspectors, but our mission is now to search for them.”

Roger removed a cup of gelatin from his dinner tray and pulled a stamp-sized case from his pocket.

He opened the top of the case and poured its contents into the indentation that had contained the gelatin cup.

Those contents were bluish-white sand.

A Japanese girl in the seat across the aisle tilted her head as she watched him. She appeared younger than elementary school age and Roger smiled at her before placing a hand over the sand.

Something strange then happened.

The sand moved.

●

The sand spread out in the indentation as if sprawling out.

It then created a pattern with itself. It moved as if there were bugs inside, but it accurately formed several geometric shapes.

In the next seat, Odor took a sip of coffee from his paper cup.

“Roger, Roger. What do you see? So this is the famous dream sand of Roger Sully created by combining philosopher’s stone powder and sand. It uses the concept that, if all things eventually become trash, sand can gather information on all things, right? You could call it a deodorant for information. …A good partner for someone who goes by the name Odor.”

Roger did not reply to Odor’s comments and looked into the moving sand. The sand drew an image of the information gathered by the philosopher’s stone powder. The image was created using the philosopher’s stone powder and a weakened version of 1st-Gear’s foundational writing concept and its meaning was transmitted via a sort of suggestion.

Across the aisle, the young girl’s eyes sparkled as she watched the sand move.

“Hey, he’s playing with sand! The sand is moving!”

She called out to the mother sitting next to her, but the mother had not noticed the sand and only bowed apologetically toward Roger and scolded the child.

Roger smiled bitterly at that, but then nodded once the sand finished moving.

“Colonel Odor, my deduction has been confirmed. Japanese UCAT has apparently informed our higher ups of Mr. Richard

Thunderson's death. Rather than form a search party, we are to stay at Yokota Air Base as temporary inspectors and act according to the agreement made in case of Mr. Thunderson's death. Also…"

Roger looked to his superior, but Odor said nothing and brought a spoonful of hardening gratin to his mouth. Roger decided to simply state the information.

"Heo Thunderson is still missing."

Hearing that, Odor lightly clasped his hands.

"So… So Thunderson's fear upon leaving for Japan as the Leviathan Road's inspector has come true. …This will greatly change the motion of the world. Do you have the document?"

"Testament." Roger pulled an envelope from his suit pocket. "I have the contract that Mr. Thunderson gave us without Japanese UCAT's knowledge. This document provides the legal right to change everything about the Leviathan Road. Japanese UCAT likely viewed Mr. Thunderson's arrival as a way to avoid our restraints, but they will see just how important an individual he was once they see this."

"Roger, Roger. Make sure you eventually shove that in their faces. …Now, let's get back on topic. What information do we have on this missing Heo Thunderson? I believe I was told her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all soldiers."

"Testament. And she does not know of UCAT's existence. However, her father's grave is in Japan. Her father and mother were deployed to Japan by American UCAT, but they transferred to Japanese UCAT. Her father died in Japan in '95 and her mother died in America in '97. This is her first time back in Japan since then."

"I see, I see. So she was born in a base in Japan. Continue."

"Testament. First, all of her grandparents have passed away."

And…

"Her paternal grandmother, Jessica Thunderson, was adopted by Richard Thunderson. Jessica's true father was James Davis, a mechanical dragon test pilot for American UCAT's air force division during World War Two. Jessica was one of the man's two children. Mr. Richard Thunderson took her in and then joined with Japanese UCAT as American UCAT's representative."

"What happened to James Davis's other child?"

"I only know that it was a boy and that he was taken in by a

distant relative, but I have been unable to track him down. However, it does seem Mr. Richard Thunderson has long been searching for him."

"How ridiculous, how ridiculous. But if you can track him down, we will have a relative to send Heo Thunderson to. …She is now the sole survivor of the Thunderson family. America welcomes those with nothing, but what about Japan?"

"Impossible to say, Colonel Odor. But…" Roger sank down in his seat. "Heo Thunderson's father was named James. …Richard Thunderson's adoptive daughter Jessica named her illegitimate son after her real father. Did the relationship between adoptive father and daughter not go well?"

Odor replied after cutting off another piece of his bread.

"Roger, Roger. Do not put sentiment in a question you can't answer. People have different rules for naming people, so you can't know. Take Heo Thunderson for example. What language is Heo from? It looks like it was given based on the sound alone. See? There's no way to know." He took a breath. "But we do know that we must begin the new mission given to us by Richard Thunderson's death and that we must find Heo Thunderson. And Roger, what will you do with the sand?"

"Testament. Some of its effectiveness remains, so I can store it and use it again."

"You are a petty, petty person. An American must have an ambitious and tolerant heart. …What is with this jam!? It's too sweet!! Call whoever is responsible!!"

"Colonel, remember your tolerant heart!"

"Roger, Roger. I may have a tolerant heart in America, but I only have a normal amount of kindness. Anyway, I hear you spent some time in Japan. You didn't become petty like those Japanese in your time there, did you? Surely you aren't thinking fondly about your time there, *are you*?"

"O-of course not. I am gung-ho for America."

"Gung-ho? What language is that?"

Roger thought for an instant, but quickly feigned calm by brushing a hand through his hair.

"I believe it is of Chinese origin."

"I see, I see. So I was mistaken when I thought it had a Japanese

ring to it."

"Testament. I believe you were mistaken."

"Good. Good, Roger. But that was only the negative test to see if you have been too strongly influenced by Japan. Next is the positive test to see how you feel about America."

"The positive test? Wh-what is that?"

The demand was simple. Odor crossed his arms and looked at Roger.

"The national anthem. Sing the national anthem of the United States of America."

Roger thought for a moment.

"Th-the national anthem?"

"Yes, yes. And loudly. Sing it loudly. And make sure to stand up."

"L-loudly? And while standing?"

Roger's expression showed he did not like the idea, but he soon shook his head.

He eliminated all idle thoughts from his face and turned to Odor.

"Colonel, I apologize, but I would like for you to show me how it is done."

"Roger, Roger. This is a test. I can't exactly give the right answer ahead of time."

"But colonel, can the answer desired by America really be restricted to a mere test? I believe the true answer resides in one's spirit. I simply wish to see your spirit. Or do you not have that spirit?"

And…

"Once you show me how it is done as my superior officer, I will follow your lead."

Roger brushed a hand through his hair and looked around. The surrounding Japanese were focused on them because they had been speaking back and forth in English for a while now.

They were on a secret mission for UCAT. Odor had decided to use a normal plane for some reason, but they had to avoid standing out too much within it.

He must understand that, thought Roger with a sigh. *He will back down and this will be over.*

Odor stood up and began to sing.

"————!!"

It happened so suddenly that Roger felt dizzy.

He found himself unable to hear or see the low singing voice, the applause from the girl sitting next to them, or the confused looks from the adults.

For some reason, he was briefly reminded of the past. He remembered the time he had shoplifted some writing implements for his younger siblings in a small rural town outside of Dallas. The store owner had chased him with the setting sun in the background, hit him with a flying kick, and then performed multiple powerbombs on him.

His younger siblings had cheered him on as they caught up.

…Stand up! Please stand up, Roger!! Count 1! 2! He stood up at 2.7!

"!"

He finally recovered.

Unpleasant sweat covered him and his entire body was oddly warm.

He looked to the side and found the elderly man still standing after finishing his song. He was looking to Roger with an expressionless look.

"Roger, Roger. You're next. Use your youth to make up for what you lack."

He handed Roger a spoon in place of a microphone. Roger took a breath while restraining the little finger that stood up from the hand holding the spoon. After using that breath to motivate himself, he stood and prepared himself.

He saw the flight attendant approaching down the aisle with a serious smile on her face.

He had to do something before she arrived.

But he frowned once he saw Odor begin eating again.

"Colonel Odor? That is your personal knife you're using to cut your bread, isn't it? Please hide it. The rules state you are not allowed to bring weapons onto the plane."

"Roger, Roger. Americans shouldn't be so petty."

"I do not think it is being petty to ask you to place that reinforced plastic knife back in the heel of your shoe. Also, Colonel Odor, please hide the special reinforced plastic gun in your breast pocket, the plastic explosive hidden in your hair…oh, and the fuse inside

your PDA's digital pen."

"Roger, Roger. How could you tell?"

"I can deduce it all from the information available to me. You normally do not put anything in your breast pocket or any kind of gel in your hair and your PDA has a touch screen. Lastly, when riding a Japanese airplane with lax security, you are sure to take something with you so that you can laugh about it later."

"I see." Rather than hiding the specified objects, he placed them on Roger's seat. "You can take care of them. Got that? You can take care of them, Roger. Return them before we land. Oh, and this too."

Odor handed Roger a small object.

It was a blue philosopher's stone.

"What is this?"

"Roger, Roger. Did you know there was an area of America's skies known as inviolable airspace even before World War Two? 5th-Gear's great black dragon would fly there for fun and shoot down the pilots who supported the Age of Flight."

"I did know that. What about it?"

"No, no, Roger. Deduce. Make a deduction. In the forties, that inviolable airspace rapidly thinned and almost completely vanished. Why?"

"The ley line alterations made by Japan's National Defense Department shifted the location of the inviolable airspace to the Pacific Ocean near Hokkaido."

"That's right. That's right, Roger. You're making your deductions now, aren't you? You're working toward an answer, aren't you? Think, Roger. Where are we and what is this philosopher's stone? The answer is simple. We are over the Pacific Ocean near Japan and this philosopher's stone is a weakened 5th-Gear concept."

As soon as he said that, the flight attendant arrived.

"Sirs, um, we are headed for some turbulence, so please sit down. And try not to raise your voices too-…"

Suddenly, the airplane shook, but it did not jerk to the side like before. It shook downwards as if something had struck it.

"…!!"

The flight attendant held onto the chair back to remain standing and the lights went out.

Roger then saw something large fly by the window Odor had been

looking out before.

Its speed easily surpassed that of the passenger plane.

Amid the continued shaking, red emergency lights came on and the cabin speakers activated.

“I apologize for the interruption to your meal, but we have just entered some turbulence. The captain says it will only last a few minutes, so please do not stand up for the time being. If you need anything, just ask a flight attendant.”

As the announcement repeated in English, Roger saw Odor step past him and out into the aisle.

“Let’s go. Let’s go and see our enemy, Roger.”

The dim light allowed him to see Odor walking down the aisle. His footing did not waver in the slightest even as the floor below him shook.

Roger then heard crying. It came from the girl next to him.

He lightly touched the girl as her mother held her shoulders. As he did, he sprinkled some philosopher’s stone sand on her.

“Give her a nice dream.”

The sand gave a definite answer by dancing about in a small whirlwind.

The girl looked at the sand for an instant, but then her eyes slowly closed.

“Good,” muttered Roger.

This time, he had gathered his sand from atop a mountain in San Francisco. The sand that had looked out over the sea and been washed over by the rain would likely give her a dream of those memories.

He ignored the flight attendant’s protests and followed Odor.

Despite the shaking, he managed to catch up.

“Colonel! Were you luring something here!? If so, this was a-…”

“Horrible method? Yes, it is a horrible method. And I am well aware there are other methods. But our higher ups were too afraid, so this was the only method available.”

Odor looked over his shoulder at Roger and then his surroundings.

“Hurry, hurry. The captain said the turbulence would only last a few minutes. If we intercept it in that time, we can make that true. Afterwards, we can sing again. We can cancel out the trouble we

caused them with a memory we will make for them. I may not have much kindness, but even with a country I hate, I will not simply leave after causing them trouble."

"I believe your thinking is truly American, colonel."

"That's right. That's right, Roger. And that's why you will do the singing. These native Japanese are on their way back from shopping in America, so show them what a true American spirit looks likes."

Roger groaned and Odor showed off his teeth and raised the corners of his mouth.

"Smile. Smile, Roger. We are on our way to see two enemies: 5th-Gear which is an enemy of America and Japanese UCAT which has become our enemy with Thunderson's death!!"

Chapter 3

“Clash of a Greeting”

Let’s go, let’s go
Let’s go meet each other
In a place of collision

●

A large enclosed space measured approximately twenty meters in every direction, the north end had a height difference of about two stories, and the southern wall was covered by a screen.

A frame on the top of the screen spelled out “Japanese UCAT New Headquarters” in black.

The headquarters down below that frame contained desks covered with communications equipment and PCs. Automatons wearing maid uniforms sat at those desks.

All of the equipment in front of them was functioning. Some of them displayed a map of Eastern Japan and some were calculating some sort of trajectory.

Suddenly, the automatons looked in a single direction. The door high up in the back opened and a few people entered through it.

The visitors did not wear UCAT’s white and black armored uniforms. They were an old man in a lab coat, a boy in a suit, and a girl in a brown dress.

The old man took the lead and pointed around with an arm wrapped in bandages.

“What do you think of Japanese UCAT’s new underground headquarters? Cool, isn’t it?”

“I might not call it cool, but it is amazing.”

“Shinjou-kun, make sure to explicitly praise the people who built it so this old man does not misunderstand. Otherwise, he will feel proud despite not building it himself.”

“M-Mikoto-kun, don’t you feel any sympathy for the injured? Can you still say that after seeing this?”

Ooshiro opened the lab coat to reveal bandages wrapped around his entire body. He even had several charms saying “Begone, evil spirits!” attached to himself. Seeing all that, Shinjou tilted her head.

“Are the bandages and charms some new kind of game?”

“No. For some reason, a fist-sized depression suddenly appeared in my chest during the night. I went to the hospital and then burns began appearing all over my body. I thought it might be some kind of curse.”

“I see. It wouldn’t surprise me if someone had a grudge against you.”

“Sh-Shinjou-kun, you’ve become a lot more like Mikoto-kun lately.”

“Oh, look Shinjou-kun. There are automatons down below.”

Sayama and Shinjou looked down and ignored Ooshiro as he held his lab coat open. They saw the automatons working on the mezzanine and first floor down below. They also saw someone standing in front of the large console built on the mezzanine.

“Ikkou-san? Are you working on something?”

The oldest of the four elderly brothers turned toward them and brushed a hand through his gray hair.

“Yes. I may not look it, but I am the assistant supervisor of field operations.”

“I see.”

The two of them looked to the bottom floor and saw Yonkichi in front of a console just like Ikkou. When the short-haired man spotted them, he waved.

“These nyew headquarters are quite nyice.”

Ikkou pressed a button on his console and the floor opened below Yonkichi.

The man fell before he could resist, the floor closed again, and there was no sign anything had happened. The surrounding automatons glanced over but did nothing more than that.

Sayama gave an impressed nod.

“That is a wonderful system, Ikkou-san.”

“S-Sayama-kun! Is that okay? Is that really okay? Where does that lead?”

“Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, it is tasteless to ask that. Death to the vulgar. …More importantly, Ikkou-san, there are quite a few automatons here. Are they from Kanda?”

Rather than Ikkou, a calm female voice answered the question.

“Testament. After the group from 3rd joined, there were too many in Kanda, so Kanda’s main force was able to move. Seventeen of us came here.”

“#8-san?”

Shinjou turned around and found a red-haired automaton. #8 bowed while holding a pile of documents.

“Testament. I have determined it has been far too long.”

“I am glad to see you have not changed.”

As Sayama spoke, Shinjou noticed some movement down below. She looked down from the terrace and saw the unoccupied automatons exchanging glances and whispering to each other.

#8 gave an expressionless glance their way.

“Sayama-sama ended 3rd-Gear’s Leviathan Road, so they are all quite interested in the two of you. As you can see, they have yet to learn how to properly set their priorities.”

One of the automatons down below raised her voice.

“You say that #8-sama, but you were the first one to get up once they arrived!!”

#8 frowned, but the voice from below continued.

“Sayama-sama! For some reason, #8-sama and Violet-sama refuse to provide us with the memory of being carried by you! We have determined they are being stingy!”

#8 replied while still frowning.

“Silence. Giving you a memory of our losses would interfere with your decisions.”

“But neither of you will format those memories!”

“Without units that have experienced loss, we cannot respond to a similar situation in the future.”

More cries of protest came from below, but #8 ignored them.

While watching her, Shinjou nudged Sayama’s side with her elbow.

“Sayama-kun, you sure are popular.”

“Oh? Such adorable jealousy, Shinjou-kun. They are merely interested in me.”

“Testament. That is exactly right, Shinjou-sama. There is a logical explanation for all of it.”

“Nwaaah! Mikoto-kun, you’re so popular. It must be nice. I wish I had some automaton fans too.”

“Enough creepy jealousy, old man. Try being loved by inanimate dolls instead.”

“Testament. That is exactly right, UCAT Director Ooshiro. Looking at this logically, I have determined you should get to bed early.”

Ooshiro sat on the ground to sulk, but everyone ignored him.

#8 then pulled a ten centimeter remote control form her apron pocket. When she aimed it at the large screen and hit a channel

button, the back of a giant brown monster appeared on the screen. An instant later, a red hero flew in from the upper left of the screen and got a solid hit on the monster suit actor's medulla oblongata with a flying kick.

"Fwoooohhhhh!!" roared the monster.

#8 nodded.

"What do you think of the extra large screen we created in the Kanda Laboratory.? Even with such a large red object rampaging around, there is no blurring."

"#8-san, what is this show?"

"Testament. That is the highlight from this week's The Venusian of Class 3-B, a drama sponsored by IAI. The main character is a space teacher who space resolves space classroom disruptions with space lectures. He shows the kindness of a teacher by avoiding a direct hit with his deadly beam and only partially killing them."

"Hm. So it's a modern-style trendy drama?"

"Shinjou-kun, I would like to say that is not the case, but I would also like to ask just when this 'modern-style' of yours is from?"

"Eh? Modern means now, right? They were showing that kind of drama in March when I lived in UCAT. There was Tokyo Sub Story for example. I haven't seen it since they announced a major 'coming out' in the next episode. I wonder what happened."

"Be glad you did not see it, Shinjou-kun. Anyway, #8-kun, are you sure you want to show us a battle between aliens?"

"Testament," answered the automaton as she operated the remote.

A moment later, the screen displayed a full CG map of Eastern Japan.

She pointed to the screen from the edge of the terrace. It showed several white curves extending over the Pacific Ocean.

One line in particular was moving in from the east.

"That is the flight path of an international passenger plane from IAL, IAI's air travel division. Its path is currently veering to the north. Ooki-sama has determined that it has been seized by an object with a large philosopher's stone reading. The American military and the JSDF are working with UCAT to gather information. At present, only Japanese UCAT and American UCAT's forces stationed in Yokota can approach, but the latter have taken no

obvious action."

"To the American military, it is a passenger plane filled with foreigners. They will not move first and cause a political dispute. They will likely only send out soldiers if we fail."

"Testament. As for what we are doing…"

Next, a few lines extended from Tokyo. They scattered over the ocean, leaving only one on the original path. That one approached the IAL plane's flight path.

#8 looked to the white line.

"That is a transport plane carrying Kazami-sama, Izumo-sama, Mikage-sama, and Hiba-sama."

"The three other than Kazami-san were excited about getting to ride a plane for the first time, weren't they?" said Shinjou. "Huh? The line just split in two."

A window opened next to the two lines that had appeared along the UCAT transport plane's path. It showed Kazami's face in a dimly-lit area. She was smiling and wore headphones.

"Okay, this is Delivery Unit 01. We're currently over the Pacific off the coast of Iwate. Reception is good."

And…

"Can you hear me?"

●

Sayama made an annoyed pose and responded to Kazami's large image on the screen.

"Kazami, can you give a better report than that? Something with a little more meat on the bones."

"Oh, you want meat on the bones, do you? We already have a dedicated operator for that. Anyway, Hiba and Mikage just left. They should be flying alongside us in Susamikado. …Those two are crazy. They board the plane as two people and leave as a god of war."

Shinjou forced a smile and asked a question.

"U-um, Kazami-san? Can you give some more detail about how they left?"

"Eh? Hiba didn't want to be thrown out the side hatch, so I called Mikage over and had her jump out first. I told them it was just a small fall."

A shout from Hiba cut into the transmission and the sound of the wind mixed in with his words.

“Sayama-san! Kazami-san is mean! She wouldn’t even give me a parachute!!”

“It sounds to me like you jumped out after Mikage-kun without putting one on. Ha ha ha. Hiba boy, you are either so inseparable you do not fear death or you are an absolute stalker. Which do you prefer?”

“I don’t like either. …But more importantly, how are things on your end?”

Shinjou looked around the room. Sayama, the automatons, and Shinjou herself were there.

Ooshiro was also there jumping up and down and waving his bandaged arms to make himself noticed, but Sayama was the one to answer.

“The current chain of command is built around the automatons and nothing else is needed. Also, the body of the Thunderson man who led to us coming here is being taken care of here.”

Kazami frowned on the monitor and Hiba’s transmission fell silent.

Based on what Shinjou had heard from personnel they passed on the way to the new headquarters, the old man named Thunderson had received a large gash in the chest from something sharp and had died of blood loss. He had carried no possessions and his expression had been noteworthy.

…*He apparently had a triumphant smile.*

Shinjou did not know what had happened.

The philosopher’s stone reading they had detected there had reappeared over the Pacific and it was now toying with a passenger plane. Communications from the plane had been cut off, but it had definitely been lightly struck a few times.

“Hurry,” she muttered.

But then she shook her head.

They were already hurrying.

However, Kazami nodded and looked to the left.

“Kaku, let’s lighten the load.”

“Sure,” he replied from off screen and a hatch could be heard opening.

Wind blew in from the left of the window showing Kazami.

"Okay, Chisato. Hand over whatever you want to throw out."

She threw a parachute and then a kick to the left.

Finally, she reached a hand to the left and closed the hatch that the wind was coming from.

"That lightened us by the weight of a large boy and a parachute. Hiba, let's hurry."

"…"

"Hey, Ryuuji-kun," said Mikage's voice. "Did you just see a splash in the water down below? What was that? Do you know?"

"A male mermaid probably jumped from the water. Wow, I'm such a romantic. Ha ha ha."

As Hiba gave a dry laugh, the footage shook. Susamikado had likely accelerated while flying alongside the plane. The extra white line that had split from the one extending across the map headed toward the IAL passenger plane.

#8 spoke up next to Shinjou.

"I have determined that is an excellent level of acceleration."

Shinjou gave a deep nod and thought "thank goodness".

Each of them was the greatest force in their individual field.

…I don't know about myself, though.

As she thought, Sayama suddenly placed an arm around her shoulder.

"Shinjou-kun, stop looking so gloomy. Don't you think that was a noble sacrifice on Izumo's part?"

"Thanks. But that's not quite what I was thinking about."

But maybe he knew that, she thought.

Suddenly, Hiba spoke over the transmission.

"This is Delivery 02! Approaching the target. I see a white passenger plane and…something huge!"

The automatons on the bridge tensed up.

At the moment, Hiba was a god of war they knew quite well. If even he was calling this "huge", it was worthy of concern for them.

Hiba's next words seemed to pierce through the harsh atmosphere they had created.

"I can see it! It's a mechanical dragon! It's a black mechanical dragon over 300 meters long and it's…fighting the passenger plane!?"

Hiba hesitated to use the word “fighting” and it was obvious why. The black mechanical dragon’s supposed opponent was an IAL passenger plane.

…Fighting with a passenger plane?

Hiba’s following shout gave the answer.

“There’s something there! A strange old man is standing on the plane’s roof!!”

Everyone looked over toward the ground near Shinjou’s feet.

Ooshiro was collapsed there and sulking.

After confirming he was there, they all spoke in unison.

“Then who is it!?”

●

Odor crossed his arms on top of the passenger plane’s roof.

The wind was flowing around him without directly hitting him. He voiced his thoughts on that high-altitude and high-speed wind and on everything else.

“Wonderful. Simply wonderful.”

He also voiced his thoughts on the attacking enemy.

“Nothing. Nothing but a pleasant target.”

As he muttered to himself, it came.

The thin clouds around the area split and a giant black form arrived from behind the plane.

The third approach already, he thought.

The mechanical dragon was over 300 meters long and made of black steel. Its slender form swam through the wind as it made its way towards him.

Either its claws and fangs were its only weapons at the moment or it did not care to use the others because the battle had not developed into a firefight. While still wrapped in wind, the dragon simply raised its head and charged forward.

Odor stood on the passenger plane which was around 70 meters long. It was smaller than the black dragon and it was almost entirely hollow, so it was like using a paper balloon against a metal weapon.

The mechanical dragon attempted to slam into the plane with its momentum, but Odor raised his right hand.

“Now, come. Come, mechanical dragon of 5th-Gear. You are the runaway dragon known as Black Sun that the records say controlled

half of 5th-Gear, aren't you? Come and see if your power can stand up to this modern age."

He snapped his fingers.

With a solid sound, several things happened.

First, an invisible impact from empty space struck the black dragon's face.

Second, a tremendous crashing sound filled the air.

Third, the black dragon's armor dented inwards.

"———!?"

The mechanical dragon gave a confused cry of protest as it pitched downwards in the air as if struck from above.

Meanwhile, Odor watched the dragon.

"How was that? How was that, savage machine? It's quite nice being able to stop your attack with a single blow."

He lowered his right hand, stuck his left hand in his suit's right sleeve, and unbuttoned the shirt cuff. He pushed up the loosened sleeve and revealed a bandage wrapped around his lower arm.

He raised the arm wrapped in the white cloth and spoke to the mechanical dragon.

"It's my turn. It's my turn to attack you."

The dragon reacted to his words by shrinking down for a moment and then quickly accelerating.

However, Odor snapped his fingers twice.

"…!?"

With two sounds of struck metal, the dragon's head and back were knocked downwards by something from above.

Nevertheless, the mechanical dragon continued forward. It swung its claws, thrust its sharp nose forward, and attempted to bring down the passenger plane in a single strike.

Odor responded by swinging his hand and snapping his fingers.

A resounding metallic sound filled the air.

The metal fangs, claws, and charging body flew at high speed, but Odor intercepted them by swinging his right arm like an orchestra conductor.

The claws were deflected, the fangs knocked away, and the charging body struck. Each attack bent or broke pieces from the black dragon's armor and each one came from above or nearly above.

“———!!”

The mechanical dragon roared. Its bestial cry sounded like the roaring of the wind and it raised its attack speed using its forward momentum.

Odor reacted with two swift attacks using his right hand. He continued the impacts from above whenever he had an opening and he reached for his pocket with his left hand.

“…”

He pulled a single cigar from that pocket.

Surrounded by the continuing metallic noises, he placed the cigar in his mouth.

When he snapped his fingers at its tip, the tip tore off and slowly lit.

He returned his left hand to his pocket and faced the mechanical dragon while continuing to swing his right hand around and snap his fingers.

“Still? Can you still not overcome these strikes? Can you still not overcome Odor’s ‘odor’?”

He produced metallic noises with only his right hand. They continued and continued. After a short pause, they rang out in quick succession.

It sounded like a bell being run at high speed.

Amid the noise, the mechanical dragon suddenly twisted.

It had not made this motion before. Rather than attacking head on, it changed direction and tried to circle around to the side.

However, Odor’s attacks rained down upon it.

The barrage of metallic noises struck its back and it quickly sank down.

“That’s right.” Odor breathed out some smoke. “Sink. Sink to the bottom of the odor. Just as I was treated by the one I once called a parent.”

However, the mechanical dragon did not give up.

Odor saw it suddenly jump up.

“Oh?” he said in admiration.

The giant black dragon used its full strength to spiral upwards and directly above the passenger plane.

Its intent was clear. Rather than using its fangs or claws, it would crush the entire plane with its full body, and Odor along with it.

He looked up at the giant black form circling overhead and gave a bitter smile.

“I see, I see. So you’ve caught on to the secret of my odor, have you? Then I’ll remove my handicap.”

He spat the cigar into the air and moved his right arm much like before. However, he moved it downwards this time.

He snapped his fingers and a sound of impact came from the plane’s left wing.

It was the sound of Odor’s power crashing into that wing.

The plane’s altitude lowered and it moved down and to the right, the opposite direction from which it was hit.

He looked overhead and saw that the diving mechanical dragon had shifted from directly overhead. It was now showing its side and back.

Odor then raised his right hand to attack.

In that instant, something flew from behind and struck the black dragon.

It was light.

●

“…!?”

Odor frowned as he saw a beam of light.

The beam was over a meter wide and it pierced through the black mechanical dragon’s chest and out its back.

“————!!”

The black dragon trembled and opened its mouth to roar at the flying attack.

Then the next attack arrived.

It was a giant black god of war.

It performed a flying kick while making a cheesy marital arts yell.

It used its four wings to accelerate the flying kick accurately into the spot on the dragon’s chest where the previous light had pierced through.

The sound of metal was enough to tear into the sky and the black mechanical dragon doubled over.

“…!!”

It produced a clearly pained cry and fell as if it had lost all strength. It passed through the clouds and into the darkness.

It showed no sign of returning as it had before.

Also, the black god of war did not pursue it. It instead flew above the passenger plane, gave a glance toward Odor, and then flapped its wings.

The god of war flew into the western sky and Odor saw something else there.

It was a transport plane painted for use at night.

With a sound of wind, the transport plane and god of war began to disappear to the west.

Odor watched them, but the shadow of the transport plane grew smaller and smaller until it completely vanished. All that remained were the wind and the night.

He lowered his raised hand and clicked his tongue into the sky.

He then loosened his necktie.

“Ridiculous. Such a ridiculous greeting. And I’m sure they thought they were saving me.”

He looked down. In the distance, he saw a gathering of bright specks and the outline of land.

It was the Japanese archipelago.

Chapter 4

“Morning of Conversation”

What are words?
If someone asks that
Is it made of words?

●

One special skill of Heo Thunderson's was the ability to sit still for long periods of time.

At the moment, she was inside a small apartment filled with the morning sun, but it belonged to a boy she did not know. He was two years older than her and had spoken in English to introduce himself as Dan Harakawa.

He was the savior who had taken her in when she had collapsed.

She observed him while exchanging a few words with him.

Based on his skin color, she guessed he was Japanese with some Latin blood.

He sat across a table from her and the table contained a breakfast of bread, a light salad, and a fried egg.

She had woken to the unusual smell of that breakfast. She had no parents and her great-grandfather always went out to eat, so she was not used to smelling breakfast in the morning.

He had greeted her and given a quick explanation of the previous night's events, but he had not asked about her. That was why Heo had asked a few questions and told him some things on her own.

She now spoke while looking into the coffee cup she held in both hands.

"And at some point, all the people vanished from the cars and buildings. O-oh, and all the lights went out. Yes, even the traffic lights."

"I see. So it turned into a ghost town."

"Yes. And my great-grandfather told me to leave, but he had sprained his ankle in the taxi and he told me to run away ahead of him."

"Run away?"

Heo did not miss that Harakawa frowned. It was true that "run away" was not a commonly used phrase, but she nodded because the truth was the truth.

"According to him, it was a something-or-other space. Then he gave me a watch and told me I could leave the space with it."

The watch she had worn on her left wrist had been placed next to the futon's pillow when she had woken up. It was now next to her fork and knife on the table.

“Can I see that?”

After asking for permission, he took the wristwatch and held it up in front of his eyes.

“It’s pretty old.”

“It’s supposed to do something if you mess with the stem.”

But she did not remember the exact process. She thought she could prove the events of last night that way, but telling him everything came first. He handed the watch back to her and she put it on her wrist.

“My great-grandfather then pulled a spear out of his pocket and had me leave. I just kept running and the city suddenly regained its light. I wondered what that meant, but I was completely out of breath and I approached the building in front of me to call for someone.”

Harakawa would know the rest.

Feeling better for having told him everything, Heo thought about her great-grandfather.

…*He has to be okay.*

He was healthy and he was the representative example of “strong” in her mind.

She convinced herself he was okay and tried to steady her trembling breathing.

As she did, Harakawa nodded.

“Where are your other relatives?”

“My great-grandfather was my only family. If he doesn’t show up where he told me to meet him, he said to visit IAI in Okutama and have them show me to an organization called UCAT.”

“I see.” he stood up and turned his back. “You have money, right? Then the first thing you need to do is get a place to stay. If you head north from here, you’ll quickly reach a railroad. The station is only a hundred meters west from there and you can find somewhere to stay near there.”

“U-um…”

“I have to get to school. Leave the key in the mailbox. It’ll probably take time for your clothes to dry, so you can stick around until then. …But you had better leave.”

“You aren’t going to ask about anything?”

“I’ve heard enough.”

He vanished into the kitchen and she sighed while listening to his footsteps.

…He's being cautious.

She hung her head as she wondered what to do.

She then saw the men's pajama top and bottom she wore and belatedly realized a certain fact.

●

After leaving Heo and entering the kitchen, Harakawa placed his forehead on the white plaster wall with a serious expression.

…This isn't good. And I thought the only strange part was the name Heo.

He felt he had taken in a landmine of a person.

He had three reasons for this.

First, everything she said was complete nonsense.

Second, she fully believed everything she was saying.

And third, she had no relatives.

On top of that, he was well acquainted with the Okutama region thanks to making motorcycle deliveries for the American base and he had even gone to IAI several times.

…But I've never seen or heard of a group called UCAT.

His danger gauge had shot into the red zone in only a few minutes.

Last night, he had called the police to ask what to do, but the officer on duty had laughed and told him to stop making jokes. He now wished he had worked harder to convince the officer instead of making a sarcastic comeback.

On the other hand, a hospital might be a better choice here than the police, but it would be a different kind of hospital than the one his mother stayed in.

…The world suddenly became a ghost town and her great-grandfather pulled out a spear? Even cheap novels and manga are more sophisticated than that.

Don't worry, he told himself. *Dan Harakawa, you did nothing wrong. You didn't know there was anything wrong with her brain last night. You did a wonderful job of saving someone.*

At any rate, he had to think about what to do today. His school attendance was pretty bad and preparations for the athletic festival

were beginning, so he could stay until lunch to get his attendance marked and then skip out on the preparations.

"I guess I'll go to school."

He whispered an alteration on what he had said while standing up, he removed his head from the wall, and he nodded.

"Um…"

Someone was standing in the kitchen entrance.

He turned around and saw a slender body standing there. Her skin looked a bit pale, so he guessed she had yet to get over her exhaustion from the previous night.

"What is it?" he asked with a frown. "Did you want some water now that you've woken up? You did sweat quite a bit last night."

"No, that isn't… Well, actually I would like that, but…um…"

She held the neck of the pajamas she wore.

"Why am I wearing this nightwear? Does that mean…?"

He could easily imagine what she was going to say next. She was going to protest that he had changed her out of the clothes that were soaked with sweat.

…Yeah, that's got to be it.

He did not particularly care what complaint she made here. The girl before him was someone who had to leave here and he had not wanted her to dirty his futon, catch a cold, and end up staying here even longer.

In fact, he would be glad if she grew to not like him and left without relying on him any further.

He also felt that was the best option for her. She would probably feel helpless at first, but if the embassy found a relative working somewhere, she would feel relieved to have that support.

And so he answered bluntly.

"You were covered in sweat, so I changed your clothes. I'm not interested in your body, so don't worry about it."

As soon as he said that, she objected with her teary blue eyes.

"Will you take responsibility?"

"Wait! What the hell kind of curveball is this?"

"B-but I thought Japan had a custom of marrying the first person you let see you naked?"

"What kind of bizarre custom is that? There's no responsibility for seeing someone naked."

More tears filled Heo's eyes and she finally took in a breath and gave a shout in Japanese.

"I was seen naked for nothing!! I demand compensation for my loss!!"

"Where did you learn that kind of Japanese!?"

She began to cry as if answering his question.

●

A vast enclosed space was filled with green.

The space was two hundred meters square and the green surrounding it was vegetation. The ground was formed from countless plants gathered together as if bathing in the light of the sunlamps hanging down from the ceiling.

Also, that ground covered the walls and even the ceiling from which the sunlamps hung.

There was a clearing in the center, but a forest covered the rest of the space's six surfaces while centered on the walls and ceiling.

This gave the area poor ventilation and the small river flowing along the green ground brought high humidity.

It was a hot and stuffy space and a crooked sign stood from the green ground at the entrance to the central clearing.

The sign read "4th-Gear Greenhouse".

The clearing currently contained two people.

Sitting on the thick lawn were Sayama in his suit and Shinjou in her dress.

They both held handheld game systems. Sayama's was a compact white model and Shinjou's was an oblong black model. The two systems were connected by a cable.

"Yay! I beat you for the third time in a row with that mounted punch!"

"Shinjou-kun, could you play a proper round of mahjong? Or maybe some other game?"

"But the rule that allows a sudden reversal through physical force is the special feature of Lovely Mahjong – Punching Edition. And this is the only IAI game that works on my latest system and the one you borrowed."

Sayama tilted his head.

"About the 'latest system' you received last week…"

“Yeah, I got it from Ooshiro-san. Look, it’s a handheld, but it has color. Because the monochrome one was called the Game Lad, this one is called the Game Dad. The main downside is that it takes six batteries to run.”

She smiled, but then she saw the battery light on the screen in her hands.

“Ah, the batteries are dying! S-Sayama-kun, let’s play another round. This game has a super special attack you can only use when your battery light is red!”

“Calm down, Shinjou-kun. You should only play an hour of video games a day.”

“Eh? Oh, right. That is the saying, but… Ah.”

Her handheld system’s battery died and she lowered her shoulders in a sigh.

“Phew. I haven’t been able to play with you in a while.”

“Still, it is disappointing we have not been able to do more than that.”

She could only give a nod to that. She had not shown it while playing the game, but she was looking weak.

…We have been pushing ourselves hard since last night.

The party to welcome the inspector from American UCAT had been cancelled.

The corpse of Richard Thunderson, the guest of honor, had been brought in and it was now in the morgue of a hospital near IAI. The opinion at the time was that he had been attacked by the same mechanical dragon that had attacked the IAL passenger plane.

…And they predict it is from 5th-Gear.

They did not even know its name, but it was huge, it had great mobility, and it had shown no sign of being destroyed even after being fired on by G-Sp2 and kicked by Susamikado.

Hiba and Mikage had returned in Susamikado and were now sleeping in the nap room.

Kazami had gone to recover Izumo from the ocean, but he had apparently been swept away by the current and they were having trouble finding him. That was nothing but an annoyance, so Sayama had declined to receive further reports on it.

…We have too little information.

Not only did they not know the identity of that dragon, they also

did not know the identity of the man who had fought it. He had gotten Kashima to steal the IAL plane's passenger manifest, but there had been no records of any foreigners on the flight.

Someone had gotten there ahead of them. As he was wondering who, Shinjou spoke up.

"Are you thinking about something?"

"Yes, about a lot of things."

"I thought so. But you haven't slept, so don't force yourself. I got a nap, but you haven't slept at all, have you?"

"Do not worry, Shinjou-kun. I can go about a week without sleep. I was trained by my grandfather when I was younger. We would have week-long fights around the house with rules saying we could hit the other when they fell asleep. If I had only realized that damn old man was sleeping while talking with his eyes open, I could have hit him another five hundred times."

"By any chance are you sleeping right now while using that secret technique?"

Shinjou set down the handheld system and sighed. She then looked around the area.

"To change the subject, I didn't expect Ooshiro-san to suddenly tell us to begin the Leviathan Road with 4th-Gear."

"Yes. It certainly was not my first guess when he handed us the key to this place." Sayama crossed his arms. "It is a strange action. I feel like he is hiding something. Last night, the American UCAT inspector named Thunderson was killed by a mechanical dragon thought to be from 5th-Gear. American UCAT says they have sent temporary inspectors, but they will not say what those inspectors are doing. And now the old man is telling us to carry out the preliminary negotiation with 4th-Gear in this greenhouse and then to take an afternoon flight to the 4th-Gear reservation in Kyushu."

"He seems to be rushing things ever since that Thunderson man died."

"There is probably something behind this, so we should be on our guard."

"Yes. The issues of adults can be trouble. Anyway, we came here, but no one else has shown up. Does 4th-Gear have people? Are they plant people or something?"

Sayama tilted his head at that.

"I am not quite sure what you mean, but do you think plants can speak with people?"

"Eh? Don't you hear about that every once in a while? Something about plants reacting to emotions."

"Are you referring to the controversy that was popular in America during the late sixties? The one where a researcher hooked a lie detector up to plants and used it to read their supposed reactions?"

"Yeah, that."

"I see." He nodded as Shinjou rubbed her eyes sleepily. "That controversy continued for about a decade in America, but no one was able to reproduce the reactions. And after a while, the same researcher announced that he found emotion-like reactions from something else."

"Eh? What was that?"

"Instead of plants, it was yogurt. The electrodes detected its emotional reaction to having milk poured into it. All of the newspapers there immediately stopped reporting on it because they found it disturbing."

"So in other words…there was someone like you?"

"Ha ha ha. Sleep deprivation makes you say the strangest things, Shinjou-kun. But at any rate, plants talking with people is nothing more than a delusion of people like the old man. You aren't thinking of using that idea for your book, are you?"

"No, no."

Shinjou shook her head and Sayama nodded.

"The way I see it, plants are plants. If they are able to express their will, they must be something similar yet different. Confusing the two comes from the pride of another type of being."

Sayama watched Shinjou.

She was looking back, but her head suddenly drooped before she quickly lifted it back up.

"Oh, s-sorry. What was that? For a bit now, I've been feeling drowsy like my exhaustion is being taken from me."

"We can discuss it later, Shinjou-kun. I can handle the preliminary negotiation on my own, so you can sleep."

"Okay. …But will the people of 4th-Gear think I'm lazy if they show up? A-and no doing anything weird while I'm asleep. Really. I mean it. For real."

After making a triple insistence, she lost her balance without realizing it and tried to catch herself on her elbows as she slowly fell backwards.

However…

“Eh?”

Something like a chair back supported her.

It was the ground. The grassy ground had risen up diagonally to support her back.

The vegetation slowly moved to form a U-shape that pushed up and supported her back.

"…"

A creature made of vegetation slowly formed from the risen ground. It was a meter long creature with a head and six legs. It stood up very slowly and its silhouette was reminiscent of an anteater or a bear.

The plant creature then lay down to act as Shinjou's chair back.

Sayama watched as she shrank back from it.

"S-Sayama-kun, is this…?"

"I think it wants you to lean against it."

"Right."

She looked at the plant creature's belly.

It raised its head-like portion, turned toward her, and tilted that head.

Seeing that, Shinjou glanced toward Sayama and nodded. With a resolute look, she leaned against the creature's stomach.

With the sound of rustling grass and leaves, her thin back sank into the creature's body. It was much like collapsing into a thick down blanket.

"Wow. It's so warm."

She narrowed her eyes and the plant creature raised its head toward her. It had no mouth, but it did have eye-like gaps. Sayama guessed those were its sensory organs.

When Shinjou thanked it, the creature shook its body once.

"Sayama-kun," she said with a smile. "Um, you know how I was feeling sleepy? I think it was this thing's doing. It's absorbing all of my exhaustion."

"Does it use some sort of concept to absorb the excess heat from other animals?"

Rather than a voice, he heard a reply in the form of an audible thought.

"Sayama?"

The voice seemed to awkwardly line up the necessary sounds.

He faced the plant creature supporting Shinjou's back. Shinjou

also turned toward it, so he must not have been the only one to hear it.

“Was that voice you?”

“Sayama.”

The voice repeated itself and he could sense no directionality in the thought voice.

“Sayama.”

This time, the voice brought movement. Similar plant creatures slowly stood up around Sayama and Shinjou. In all, there were around a dozen of them.

But then Sayama noticed more of the creatures rising up within the forest, on the walls, and on the ceiling.

They all tilted and shook their bodies as if troubled and asked the same question with the rustling of grass and leaves.

“Sayama?”

And so Sayama replied.

“By any chance, is the Sayama to which you refer Sayama Kaoru?”

He could only imagine that to be the case. He had never been here before and his grandfather had been in charge of 4th-Gear.

However, he received no answer. The plant creatures merely spoke while gathering together and lying down.

“Sayama is Sayama.”

They continued.

“Shinjou is Shinjou.”

“Eh?”

Shinjou gave a sleepy sound of confusion while partially curled up.

Sayama used a hand to tell her to calm down.

“They must be a race that can distinguish between categories but cannot distinguish between individuals within a category. The voice we are hearing is likely the collective consciousness of them all. They view me and my grandfather as the same Sayama and they view you and the Shinjou of the National Defense Department as the same Shinjou.”

“Then that means…”

“Yes. They know my grandfather and the Shinjou of the National Defense Department, so they must be the residents of 4th-Gear.”

The plant creatures then called to them. They began with

Sayama's name, but then said the following:

"Go with Sayama."

"What?" asked Sayama.

As he wondered what they meant by "going with" him, they all raised their heads and spoke a single word.

"Promise."

●

The JR Chuo Line's rush hour continued from seven to nine in the morning.

Any train one boarded from any station along the Chuo Line would be crowded. Even the trains leaving Tokyo would leave one inundated by a wave of people if they did not secure a seat upon departure.

One train was travelling west to Kanda, the first station after Tokyo Station. This express train had left Tokyo Station just past eight and was on its way to Oume.

After passing Kanda, the number of passengers exceeded the capacity. Most of the passengers were office workers or students and they were securing enough space to stand on their tiptoes.

However, some did not fit those categories. In the fourth car from the back, two foreigners in suits stood in the space closest to the exit. One was a tall elderly man and the other was a young man with glasses.

Whenever the train shook, the wave of people surged and threatened the crush the two of them.

The elderly man frowned and spoke in English.

"Roger, Roger. What kind of torture is this? Who can I complain to?"

"Colonel Odor, this is a travel ritual called Sankin-Koutai that has long been practiced in Japan. When the shogun ruled a form of government known as the Edo shogunate, the lords of the local governments were ordered to travel to Edo, but that ritualistic travel brought an unnecessary number of people to Edo Castle. We left from Tokyo Station which is near the Imperial Palace where Edo Castle used to be. In other words, Tokyo Station is the birthplace of this ritual."

"I see, I see. So should I interpret this as a bizarre Japanese

custom?"

"Testament. Please maintain a tolerant heart. Also, I had to put up with these rush hour crowds every morning when I lived in Japan."

"Roger, Roger. That is about you. It has nothing to do with me. Also, I said I wanted to observe the working situation in this country, but I do not recall saying I wanted to experience it."

"Is that so?"

Roger lowered his shoulders and sighed.

"Anyway. Anyway, Roger. Start by telling me about the target we must search for. You knew her father well, didn't you?"

"Testament. Heo Thunderson's father, James Thunderson, was American and yet a member of Japanese UCAT."

The train shook as they arrived at Ochanomizu Station. The train's speakers played an announcement, people moved, and the density of people grew once more.

With a heavy lurch, the train began to move and Roger spoke within the surging wave of even more people.

"James was a mechanical dragon pilot. At the time, Japanese UCAT had a department for developing mechanical dragons, but they did not have a decent pilot. They tried to have one sent from American UCAT, but…"

"We refused. Yes, we refused them, Roger. I know what happened on the American end during the late eighties. American UCAT was the only one with mechanical dragon technology and we weren't about to hand it over to someone else."

"But one pilot went to Japanese UCAT while essentially defecting. That pilot was James Thunderson. He was young for a mechanical dragon pilot and he was our chief pilot at the time, but he suddenly left American UCAT, stole a mechanical dragon that same day, and headed for Japanese UCAT."

"Why? Why would he betray America?"

The train shook to the left and the wave of people tilted while Roger pushed his glasses up his nose.

"It was his grandfather's influence. His grandfather had come to Japan as a part of American UCAT and helped destroy 5th-Gear. James was proud of that fact. However, his mother was adopted by his grandfather and he apparently only learned of that in high

school. I would guess that played a role in why he wanted to learn more about his grandfather," explained Roger. "American UCAT acted to cover up this scandal. James Thunderson was transferred to Japanese UCAT and the Gulf War was used to send other young members who wished to defy the higher ups to the American UCAT forces stationed in Japan in the name of 'assisting'. We are on our way to Yokota which, with the Gulf and the time afterwards, will be my home for the third time."

Roger lowered his head slightly to hide his expression from Odor.

"Also, he is no longer with us. He died on the scene of the Great Kansai Earthquake which I also visited. He and many others who I can surmise were my friends never returned from that place. Afterwards, I personally erased all of the records."

Odor gave a small snort of either laughter or contempt.

"Roger, Roger. Try to remember. Japanese UCAT is our enemy now."

"I understand that. They were unable to protect the hero that was Richard Thunderson and they are selfishly continuing the Leviathan Road which affects the fate of the world. That will be our official reasoning, won't it?"

"Yes. Yes, it will, Roger. American UCAT will not allow them to ignore everyone else as they set the world in motion."

The train shook as they arrived at Yotsuya.

The wave of people surged over and somewhat flowed out the door. Familiar with Japan, Roger avoided the current.

However, Odor was not familiar with the country and he was caught in the current and swept onto the station platform.

"Roger! Roger! Do something!"

While thinking of a way to pacify his distressed superior officer, Roger stepped out onto the platform while preparing himself to be late to Yokota.

●

Sayama communicated with the plant creatures.

They seemed to share their thoughts, but the individual creatures seemed to make individual decisions for their actions. The one in front of him was currently tilting its head while swaying as if in the wind.

“Sayama long time. Long time since Sayama.”

Sayama listened to that audible thought.

…They said “go with Sayama”, but does that mean they want to go with my grandfather?

He felt a slight pain in his chest as he asked a question.

“I am glad we could meet ‘again’ after so long. But let me ask you one thing. Why are you ‘going with Sayama’?”

“Promise.”

“What is this promise?”

“Promise.”

“Do you know what was promised?”

“Promise is promise. Go with Sayama.”

He was making no progress and he wondered if this conversation counted as the preliminary negotiation.

…I suppose that depends on what I say.

They said they would go with him, but as seen with 2nd-Gear, the Leviathan Road was meant to correct their current situation. If they had some complaint or request, he could not cast it aside and simply use them.

He recalled the details of 4th-Gear.

4th-Gear’s Concept Core was possessed by the Tree Serpent Mukiti, so he needed these creatures to help him reach a negotiation with that serpent.

He wondered if he could find a way to do that and asked another question.

“Can I meet the one named Mukiti?”

“Don’t know.”

“You do not know? Do I need some form of qualification before I can meet him?”

“Promise.”

The same word was repeated.

…Everything is sealed by the word promise.

They seemed delighted to meet him and Shinjou, but they were satisfied with that and shut the door. The key to that door was the word promise.

…Most likely, my grandfather made some sort of promise and 4th-Gear promised to go with him in return.

When he had asked about a qualification to meet Mukiti, they had

spoken that single word.

…When the promise to go with Sayama is fulfilled, I can meet Mukiti.

That pointed to a certain fact.

"Was my grandfather unable to keep his promise?"

4th-Gear's residents gave no answer. When he saw the plant creatures merely tilt their heads, he smiled bitterly.

…This may be one of the problems between 4th-Gear and Low-Gear.

There was a mystery here.

If Mukiti was in Low-Gear, it should have meant Sayama's grandfather had kept his promise and the residents of 4th-Gear had "gone with Sayama".

However, the plant creatures were in Low-Gear and yet they said that they would "go with Sayama" and that a "promise" was needed to meet Mukiti.

Had his grandfather kept the promise or not?

Why had the people of 4th-Gear "gone with Sayama"? And if they had, why did they still require a "promise"?

He did not know, but he did know one thing.

"You are waiting for me to fulfill that promise, aren't you?"

"Go with Sayama."

He took that as an affirmative, so he did not give up.

…I will reveal the identity of that promise.

"What will happen when you go with me?"

"Don't know."

"Are you going with me even though you do not know?"

"Promise."

"Why did you make that promise?"

"Because promised."

He was making no progress. What mattered to them was that they had made the promise and they did not seem to question the reason they had done so, the details of having done so, or the future it would lead to.

…What an amazingly pragmatic race.

It was possible they would not complain even if they were deceived and destroyed because of it.

While thinking about that, Sayama suddenly realized something.

…My grandfather would have thought the same thing.

His grandfather had gone to 4th-Gear, so he would have met these creatures. And as the Concept War continued, what would he have thought of them?

The left side of Sayama's chest hurt. Shinjou was usually by his side, but she was now curled up and sleeping on the belly of a 4th-Gear creature. He welcomed the pain if it meant he could avoid interrupting the peaceful look on her face.

"Do you remember the Concept War?"

"No."

They may not have taken an active role in that war. It was even possible they had not even known of its existence.

Sayama decided it was both. He suspected the other Gears had not taken any direct action against them. As for why…

"Was your world filled with nothing but you?"

"Lots but the same."

"In other words, your body was split many times over, but you were ultimately a single body and mind?"

"The same."

"I see. So even when other Gears visited, they realized they could not fully destroy you. You had great vitality and a near inexhaustible ability to regenerate, but you had no ability to fight and they did not know where among you Mukiti and the Concept Core were. That is why they decided to leave you until the end and allow the time of destruction to take care of you."

"Don't know, but Mukiti knows."

Sayama's eyebrows moved when the creatures brought up Mukiti on their own.

"What kind of person is Mukiti?"

"Here but not here."

Sayama replied with another question.

"In other words, Mukiti is you, but he is not you?"

However…

"…"

He received a thought of silence in return. That response meant they did not know.

Sayama began gathering his thoughts on this Zen dialogue of a conversation. He began with what the plant creatures had just said.

…That means Mukiti is with them but not with them.

The comment contained a contradiction which was why he had asked his own question.

…Mukiti is you, but he is not you.

That also contained a contradiction, but it had been met with silence.

He knew that there was a contradiction that received a response and one that did not.

He removed only the similar contradiction from the two questions and was left with a single word.

…You.

That word gave Sayama something to say.

“Mukiti lived in symbiosis with you who can be called the world of 4th-Gear, but he was a second individual who was distinct from your mind, wasn’t he? He was like a parasite on that world.”

“Mukiti is here but not here.”

They did not deny it.

That meant Mukiti possessed the Concept Core and lived in symbiosis with the 4th-Gear residents.

In that case…

“Was Mukiti a control system that symbiotically managed 4th-Gear?”

●

Sayama had begun to lean forward a little, so he straightened up.

He took a breath and lowered Baku from his head. A nearby plant creature seemed to take interest in Baku and approached.

The two creatures relaxed, lay on their bellies, and stared at each other without moving.

…This is a generally peaceful world.

Sayama let Baku make a friend and asked a question of the creature in front of him.

“Where is Mukiti?”

“Here but not here.”

He felt he understood the creatures words more clearly now.

“Here but not here” was not a contradictory question from a Zen dialogue.

“Yes, he is with you. As your controller, he is watching over all of

you no matter where you are. However, his true form is not here. Where is it? The 4th-Gear reservation in Kyushu?"

"Far away place?"

"It is. It is cut off by a world, after all."

"Then there. Mukiti is there. Promise. Promise with Sayama."

I see, he thought. *It is funny how much of this is pure speculation.*

However, he had no other choice but to keep his mind moving. If his thoughts were not way off base, his grandfather had also spoken with these plant creatures and met Mukiti.

…And they promised to go with him.

If Sayama could persuade Mukiti, their controller, he could move all of the plant residents of 4th-Gear and find a use for their environmental changes.

He then realized he was walking in his grandfather's footsteps.

…I hope for this to be the only way in which I grab at that monkey's short tail.

He asked another question as if to cast aside that thought.

"Can I…that is, can Sayama go meet Mukiti without keeping the promise?"

"No. Keep promise."

He received a powerful rejection when it came to the word promise.

"If I do not keep the promise, I cannot meet Mukiti?"

"Promise. Sayama's promise."

Sayama then realized his misunderstanding about the meaning of the promise.

…It is not that I cannot meet Mukiti without keeping the promise.

That was the promise 4th-Gear had made. "Sayama's promise" was something different.

He gave voice to his realization.

"I made a promise myself to not meet Mukiti unless the promise was kept, didn't I?"

"Promise! Sayama's promise!"

He could hear joy in the audible thought and that thought gave him a smile.

They were surely rejoicing that their words were finally getting

through to him.

He too was relieved that they were communicating properly and he went over the problem.

“I see. First, I made a certain promise and then made a second promise to meet Mukiti once that promise was fulfilled. And you then made a third promise to go with me when that happened. Is that it?”

“Yes! Promise! Promise with Sayama! First promise! First! First! First!”

“I see. So the first promise made with another in 4th-Gear’s history was made with Sayama.”

“Sayama told us. Important. Promise is important. Promise will never disappear. But Sayama is different.”

The thoughts came all at once.

“Sayama is different. Sayama is not promise. Sayama will eventually disappear.”

Sayama nodded.

Inside, he was surprised. 4th-Gear’s people were close to immortal as long as the world was not destroyed, but this meant…

…They understand the concept of death.

His grandfather had likely taught them that.

The creatures had said that promises will never disappear but that Sayama would.

Sayama asked about the concern that would bring.

“While you have a collective consciousness and will live for close to forever, we will disappear. When my grandfather died, his promise should have died with him. While you will wait for the promise to be fulfilled for eternity, my grandfather’s life was finite.”

Which meant…

“Why do you view me and my grandfather as the same?”

At first, he had thought they were unable to distinguish between individuals because they did not have individuals themselves, but that was not the case.

“You clearly understand that we have finite lives, but you still view me as the same ‘Sayama’. Why is that?”

“Told Sayama would come again. New Sayama.”

“…”

The plants’ thoughts filled the air.

“Promise will not disappear. Sayama will come. Keep promise. Sayama will come to keep promise.”

I see, thought Sayama while sighing inwardly.

…My grandfather once negotiated with them and made their first promise with them.

But for some reason, he had not fulfilled that promise.

And yet for some reason, they had come here.

…Most likely, he was fine with not having fully upheld his promise.

“You still desire the promise because you want to have that unfulfilled promise carried out, don’t you? That will mean both sides kept their promise and are equal.”

The word “debt” came to mind.

In terms of the Leviathan Road, 4th-Gear had already given their conditions for the negotiation.

…They came here unconditionally.

In that case…

…Fulfilling the promise is well worth negotiating over.

To reconfirm that, he asked a question.

“I can meet Mukiti again by fulfilling that promise, correct?”

“Keep promise, so go with Sayama.”

●

Sayama crossed his arms and looked at the plant creatures that shook their bodies together.

…What was the first promise my grandfather made with them?

They knew, but they were not telling him. Their collective consciousness viewed Sayama’s promise as belonging to Sayama and they would not intrude on the territory of another’s thoughts.

This is an assignment from my grandfather, he thought. *I have to answer what it is they want.*

“It is true that is the foundation of negotiation.”

…What did he promise them and what do they hope to gain from it?

Land? Peace of mind? Some kind of power? There had to be a hint.

For example, 4th-Gear already had a reservation and this place as well.

As for peace of mind, this room made it clear any fear of external enemies had been resolved.

And as for power, not only did this race not desire to fight, but they seemed unable to fight.

…Then what is it?

He realized he was leaning forward again, so he straightened up.

To give himself a change of pace while gathering his thoughts, he took a breath, leaned back, and placed his hands on the ground.

His fingers sank into the plants as if digging down. *It's all plants,* he thought.

"No."

Similar to his discussion with Shinjou about communicating with plants, these 4th-Gear residents just so happened to have bodies constructed from plants, but they could exchange thoughts, try to keep promises, and liked independence.

They were not something to protect or to look down on.

…They must be the same. Even if they desired protection, they would not view us as superior to them.

Since his grandfather had negotiated with Mukiti who controlled them, it was possible they had actually had the superior position.

What did it mean to be equal?

1st-Gear had desired to recover their past pride and have a place to live on their own.

2nd-Gear had desired to accept their own power while also living in Low-Gear.

3rd-Gear had desired to clear away their own crimes yet continue to use the power that had led to those crimes.

All of them contained a common factor down at the bottom.

…The desire to live in Low-Gear using their power.

Sayama thought on the word "power".

"My grandfather must have negotiated to give you a place where you could use 4th-Gear's power to live in Low-Gear and have peace of mind. That would have settled any debt."

In that case, what was 4th-Gear's power?

He thought and came to a certain possibility.

…4th-Gear's power is their vitality and their ability to heal others.

But in that case, what had his grandfather attempted to do with

their power?

Sayama thought about using it for a hospital but then shook his head.

Even in the postwar times, the world had not advanced enough to accept life forms from another world. Even if they could heal and save people, it would cause a commotion if people found out about these thinking plants.

…Was he going to have them heal injured UCAT members?

No, he realized.

If they had become UCAT's healers, this greenhouse would be much more open and used as a medical room.

Also, he thought before asking his next question.

"Why does 4th-Gear not work as healers for UCAT?"

If they had come to Low-Gear to use their healing ability, 4th-Gear healing would be a major part of UCAT.

He looked forward while he wondered why, but the plant creature only lay on its belly and tilted its head.

"Promise."

"The promise, hm?"

What had they promised to use their power on?

He continued to think, but then…

"Could it be…?"

He recalled two facts from when the plant creatures had shown up in this large greenhouse.

First, they had known a name other than Sayama.

Second, they had used their healing ability.

"And they did so by wrapping around Shinjou-kun."

He looked to Shinjou on his left side.

She was curled up on the stomach of the plant creature bent in a U-shape.

"…"

And she was asleep. Her black hair moved a bit and her expression was one of peace.

He then looked around himself, but none of the plant creatures made any attempt to remove his own exhaustion.

They had chosen Shinjou over him.

He remembered a section from the National Defense Department documents that Kashima had sent them during the summer and that

they still could not read the entirety of.

"My grandfather took over working on 8th-Gear in place of 4th-Gear. And he did so because 8th-Gear had been assigned to Shinjou Kaname who had fallen ill."

The plant creatures looked up.

"Shinjou."

"Yes, that is correct. Shinjou-kun. Is Shinjou-kun the promise?"

The collective consciousness responded to that.

"Promise! Shinjou! Promise!!"

He nodded and looked to Shinjou who slept while clutching her black binder.

"I do not know what kind of person Shinjou Kaname was, but my grandfather spoke with Mukiti, came to an understanding, and made a promise, didn't he? He asked if you could save Shinjou-san who had fallen ill. And if you did have the power to save him, he asked you to come to Low-Gear where your power could be used elsewhere. That way, he could prepare a place for you even if 4th-Gear was lost."

He took a breath.

"He promised to let you meet the person named Shinjou, didn't he?"

If the promise had not been upheld, it meant they had not met Shinjou Kaname.

However, they had come to Low-Gear.

He did not know if that had been his grandfather's or Mukiti's desire and he did not know why they had done it. Whatever the result, he would look into that from now on.

And he would fulfill the promise as well.

"Promise!"

The creatures' thoughts rang loudly.

"Meet Shinjou. Mukiti is waiting. Sayama keeps promise."

Sayama gave another deep nod.

"Yes, I will go with Shinjou-kun to meet the one who watches over you."

"Promise! Promise! Promise!!"

"Yes, that is a promise. It is a testament."

"Testament?"

"That is the latest way of referring to a promise."

“Testament!!”

As the thought voice rang out, Sayama raised his head.

At the same time, someone appeared from beyond the trees.

It was Ooki. She may have just woken from a nap because she wore pajamas and looked at the swaying and rustling plant creatures.

“Oh, my. How lively.”

“Do you think you can fit in here as a tree spirit, Ooki-sensei?”

“I don’t know…”

She smiled and her long ears seemed to stand up as if reacting to the surrounding thoughts.

She shook those ears and spoke.

“Excuse me for a moment, Sayama-kun, but I have to get to school. With the athletic festival preparations, I have to at least show up by lunchtime.”

“Oh, is that so? And I thought the one who takes attendance would have to be there in the morning.”

“Sayama-kun, why are you always so mean to your teacher?”

“I merely stated the obvious. Do you perhaps have a persecution complex? And when have I ever been mean to you, tardy teacher?”

“J-just now!!”

After shouting out, she sighed.

“Listen.” She placed a hand on her forehead and groaned while the surrounding plant creatures looked up at her. “How about we settle for this? Harakawa-kun has been absent a lot lately, so if he isn’t in class today, please go to his home and get him.”

“Ha ha ha. I understand what you are trying to say. …You are making no sense. Go yourself.”

“But his apartment’s landlord has started recognizing me lately. I got some leftover dinner last time I went, but I can’t return the dish it was in because I haven’t washed it yet.”

“Oh? Which do you think would make a better nickname for you: filthy teacher or lazy teacher?”

“Hmm. I have pretty stringent standards for elegance, so I don’t think either fit me.”

All of the plant creatures tilted their heads at that.

“Str-…string-…strange?”

“Wh-what a rude collective consciousness.”

Sayama ignored her and shook Shinjou awake.

They had to travel to Kyushu that afternoon, but now they had an extra job to take care of.

Chapter 5

“The Depths of Memory”

Think back and you will reach your past self
But
Does that directly link to your future self?

●

Heo dried off in front of a small bathroom.

She was in a strange apartment, she had nothing to wear, and the apartment's owner had left.

She was glad she had gotten permission to use the shower when Harakawa had left for school. Her clothes and underwear were hanging from the kitchen ceiling, but she had still been covered in the sweat from the previous night.

The sweat had hardened her hair, but that hair was now damp instead.

However, she had made one mistake. Just because she liked the color, she had chosen the blue container of shampoo. She had kept her guard up because it was made by IAI, but it had still felt so refreshing she had accidently let out a shout.

…Do boys like that kind of thing?

A strange refreshing feeling remained around her armpits even after drying off with a bath towel.

She found it ticklish as she wrapped the towel around her.

The cloth felt good on her skin and she suddenly remembered that Harakawa had seen her naked.

She blushed slightly.

…If I get married in the future, should I tell my husband he isn't the first one to see me naked?

She sighed and reached for the clothes hanging from the ceiling, but then she realized something.

"They're damp."

They still had some water in them and they had the dampness of something that had just left the washing machine.

…Boys.

But after that thought, she shook her head. While he had seen her naked, he had also saved her and been considerate.

She could not let herself focus on the negative results and ignore his intentions.

The clothes would need to dry before they were back to normal, but he had given it some thought.

"Thank you very much."

She smiled as she spoke to someone who was not there and then

she looked around.

A white washing machine was located to the side of the bath entrance. It was the IAI high-speed washing machine named the “Super Twister”. A similar model was popular in America, but she was pretty sure it had been brought to court because it had put a permanent tendency to spin on a child who had played inside it.

A basket was located next to the machine and it contained the pajamas she had removed and his clothes below that.

That was probably what he had worn the night before and maybe before that.

…He should have washed those, but he did my clothes first.

She felt she was meddling, but she turned on the washer. The time settings for the different functions appeared on the console, but the time for the spin cycle was set very low. She wondered why.

“Maybe because he runs it after getting home from work at night.”

He would want to keep the noise as short as possible, but it was daytime now. While making a mental note to return it later, she set the time to three times longer.

She divided the laundry between whites and colors.

She first placed the white clothes in the washer and dropped in the appropriate amount of the detergent placed on top of the machine. She did not see any fabric softener, guessed he did not own any because he was a boy, and hit the start button.

The sound of the motor began and the water shook. Once the rotation began, noise filled the previously still apartment.

She let out a breath to add her own noise to the mix. The rhythmic rotation of the water was quite pleasant.

The next thing she knew, she had opened her mouth and started to sing a song.

Silent night, Holy night
Long we hoped that He might,
As our Lord, free us of wrath,
Since times of our fathers He hath
Promised to spare all mankind
Promised to spare all mankind

She sang a verse of the song she had sung on the night just before her father had died.

She recalled also singing it later at the town church her mother had often brought her to.

She kept her voice low enough to be hidden by the washing machine's noise and she sang with her eyes closed.

"…"

She then took a breath, nodded, gathered strength in her shoulders, and opened her eyes.

The washer was rotating. She wondered if her clothes would be dry by the time it finished washing and she looked down at herself and the bath towel she wore.

"Um…"

She hesitated, but she removed the towel and put it in the washer. She thought about wrapping the futon around her instead and she recalled that Harakawa had said he would be working until late at night after school.

…It shouldn't be a problem if it takes me a little longer before I leave.

After telling herself that, she lightly wrapped her arms around herself and walked toward the living room.

"First, I need to go to the train station."

She needed to take a bus or taxi to the Nishitama Cemetery that they had passed the previous night.

…Will great-grandfather be there?

She lowered her head as she entered the living room and approached the futon folded up on the tatami mats.

She unfolded it in the morning light and placed it over her head as if trying to crawl into it.

She found herself surrounded by nothing but her own scent, the weight of the futon, and darkness. The only sound was the washing machine muffled by the futon.

She then repeated a certain thought.

…Is it happening again?

She closed her eyes and recalled something from long ago. When she had been a child…no, she was still a child, but it was long before now.

She recalled when she had lost her mother.

●

Heo remembered being in a larger place than she was now. It had been made of wood, the ceiling had been high, and it had contained lines of pews as well as a cross and a pulpit up front.

It had been a church. The light of midday had shined through the stained glass, but she had lain on the floor right in front of the pulpit.

She had been exhausted from running until she had collapsed to the ground.

Her memories had been in chaos at the time. While trying to remember why she had been running, she had been reminded of her father who had died long before.

Her father had often praised her for being an incredibly fast runner.

Before moving to the town that contained that church, she had lived in a place with lots of fields and running had allowed her to see many different things.

She had often gone outside with her parents, partially to receive their praise.

Once her father had died, she had come to that church's town. When going shopping there, she had run down the road while tugging on her mother's arm.

Her mother had often scolded her for running on ahead, but she had always been smiling when doing so. It had been during that time that her mother had given her the necklace of stones.

Was this the same as back then? She had a faint memory of her mother suddenly shoving her forward while they were taking a walk together.

Her mother had told her to run.

She had asked why and her mother had answered while pointing at the church on the top of the hill.

"It's a race. When we get there, I'll sing for you."

But the smile on her mother's face had been stiff.

She had thought something was wrong, but she had been too afraid to ask and had thus begun to run. She had simply run while squeezing the necklace her mother had given her as a mental support.

Even her mother's footsteps behind her had scared her as she had run to the church as fast as she could and then collapsed.

The young Heo in her memories had stood up and wondered what had happened.

She had run back to the church's entrance and found the door had closed.

When she had pushed open the wooden door, she had found a certain sight: with the field in the background, someone sat with their back to her.

Her mother had sat on the stairs up to the church.

"——————"

She had called out to her mother but received no answer. When she had hesitantly placed a hand on the woman's shoulder, she had found an odd weight there.

The weight moved in her direction, she had been unable to support it, and her mother had slowly lain back on the stairs.

The white shirt her mother had always worn on walks had been dyed a dark red from the chest to the stomach.

"…!"

Heo had shouted something and embraced her mother. Then, her mother had moved slightly.

Her unfocused eyes had looked up into the sky and then at Heo.

She had been smiling and her eyes finally focused as she looked at Heo.

"…"

She quietly uttered something that did not even form words and her hand fell limply down.

"———!"

Heo had shouted and shaken her mother, but the woman would no longer react.

After crying out for a while longer, Heo had looked around.

What had happened and what had caused it?

That was when she had seen it.

It was wind.

She had seen a mass of wind in front of the church. It had shaken and her memories remembered nothing except that it had been gigantic. The movement of the air had seemed like a mountain.

That was when the word "demon" had entered her mind.

And then the demon had vanished.

She did not remember much after that. Her great-grandfather had taken her in and they had moved again and again, but everywhere they went, the story of her mother's death would get out and she would be known as the girl saved from a demon attack.

A few people who had come running had apparently seen the same mass of wind as she had.

The further away she went, the more the rumor grew distorted as it pursued her.

She went from being protected by god to being loved by a demon and sometimes she was said to be on the run after killing the people of her old town.

At first, she had been angry, but at some point, she had started to cry instead. Even later, she had accepted it as normal and hidden it away within herself.

Her sociable great-grandfather had moved with her again and again and the rumors had eventually vanished, but she had started actively avoiding people by that point.

…If I get close to someone…

That demon could come again and kill them.

She had lived for eight years while dragging those thoughts around. She had to take her entrance exams this year, so her great-grandfather had made various arrangements and suggested they visit her father's grave. If nothing happened then, he said everything would be okay.

"But it came again."

This was the same.

Her mother had once told her to run and her great-grandfather had done the same last night.

She was praised for her running, but she may no longer have anyone to give that praise.

…What happened to great-grandfather?

She had to find out, but then she opened her eyes in the darkness.

"…"

She took a breath inside the darkness of the futon, wiped away the tears that had appeared in the corners of her eyes, and crawled forward to leave the futon.

But her head hit something hard.

“~ ~”

She raised her head and the futon along with it and she found a metal window frame. She belatedly remembered she had entered the futon headfirst with the futon spread out in front of the large southern window.

She turned around with the futon still on top of her and she moved to the table.

During breakfast, Harakawa had said he had left the key on the table.

“Huh?”

But there was no key there.

She tilted her head and looked to the wall between the living room and kitchen. Perhaps as a decoration, ten or so American motorcycle license plates were placed on that wall.

However, there was no key hanging on the walls or the columns.

“…?”

She tilted her head further and stood up to check the kitchen. She folded the futon up next to the living room wall and moved swiftly while lightly wrapping her arms around her naked body.

She checked on the sink, the walls, the columns, the running washing machine, and the laundry basket, but she could not find a key.

“Um…”

…Now I can’t leave.

She wondered what to do and brought a hand to her neck.

She felt a tremble run down her back. The cause was simple.

…My necklace.

The necklace her mother had given her was gone.

She frantically checked through the laundry basket, but there was no sign of it there. She doubted Harakawa was the type to steal, so she was left with only one conclusion.

“I dropped it while running last night?”

She wanted to go out and search and her thoughts raced outwards, but her clothes still needed time to dry and she did not have the key.

“…”

Unsure what to do, she started back for the living room and recalled when she had cried because Harakawa had seen her

naked.

He had stayed with her until she stopped crying and he had told her she could use the bath as he left.

And he had locked the door.

“That means he took the key with him.”

終わりのクロニクル

She guessed he had forgotten to leave the key because she had confused him by crying.

And as she held her body and wondered what to do, the front door opened and Harakawa stepped in.

He was clearly in a bit of a rush.

“I forgot to leave the key. Heo, are you here?”

He stopped speaking when he saw her.

“——————”

He frowned while she gasped and froze in place.

While still looking at her, he tilted his head.

“Why in the world are you naked in the middle of the day?”

He then saw Heo cry for the second time that day.

●

A few people walked in the sunlight as noon approached.

The three boys and one girl moved by foot and motorcycle.

A girl in a school uniform rode on the back of the motorcycle.

Of the two male students walking in front of the motorcycle, the one with long hair turned around while shaking a travel bag.

“Kazami-san, I’m amazed you found Izumo-san. How far had he drifted?”

As they crossed the railroad track cutting across the road, Kazami replied while sitting on the back of the motorcycle.

“I found him being chased by sharks off of Fukushima. If he had drifted any further, he might have ended up on a route circling the Pacific. Kaku, how was the ocean?”

“When there aren’t any swimsuits around, the ocean is just the ocean. I don’t want to remember any of it. …But anyway, aren’t you on your way to Kyushu after this, Sayama, Shinjou? Should you really be running an errand for Ooki-sensei?”

“We already have a response from 4th-Gear. More importantly, I do not see why you two would come along for one of Ooki-sensei’s random requests.”

Sayama turned back toward Izumo and Kazami. He held two travel bags.

“Well, we can view it as the student council giving a warning to a student who is not showing up at school. It would have been nice to have the Hiba boy along after Kazami half-forced him to join as

assistant treasurer. He is in the same club as Harakawa, after all."

"It would be strange if we brought Mikage with us and Hiba said he was training with her at UCAT after earning his attendance for the day. Sibyl was very excited about finishing the armored uniform for Mikage. She's acting like she has a new little sister. It makes me feel a bit lonely," said Kazami with a shrug. However, she soon gathered her eyebrows together. "But that isn't the only reason we're here. UCAT's Japanese branch has received some instructions to be carried that completely ignore the fact that we're supposed to be off duty. We're to be on our guard in the Akigawa area and take Heo Thunderson into custody if we find her."

Sf had informed Kazami of that fact when she had arrived in the decorated lobby during mid-morning. Diana and the others had been burning straw dolls on a Buddhist altar. They claimed it was to clean up the celebration preparations, but Kazami had not understood what it meant.

"They probably want to make up for that Thunderson man's death a little by finding his missing great-granddaughter."

Kazami looked across the others and pulled a photograph from her breast pocket. It showed a blonde girl in shorts running on a track and the words "Japanese UCAT Overseas Travel Department" were printed at the bottom.

"The girl in this photo – that was clearly taken without her knowledge – is the one who disappeared last night. But this photo isn't much to go by. I'd like some more information, but it's all we have because it seems America isn't giving us anything else."

"I hope we do find her, but when it has been this long with no word from her and no demand for a ransom, she might have been abducted and imprisoned by someone with as many odd interests as the old man."

"I seriously doubt another abnormality like him exists. …But that black mechanical dragon from last night created the concept space she escaped from, right? What was that?"

Sayama answered by pulling some copy paper from the side pocket of one travel bag. It was a printout of the classified UCAT data Kashima had sent them that summer.

He expressionlessly held the documents up toward Baku on his head.

“Have any of you realized that we can read more of this now? Specifically, the section on 5th-Gear. Oh, Izumo. No need to force yourself. I understand that savages have a low literacy rate.”

“Don’t look down on me, Sayama. I’m a high-level person who learned to read ‘women’s bath’ before any other Japanese term.”

“Th-that certainly is a high level of something…”

“You don’t have to respond to those two idiots, Shinjou. Just hurry up and check the documents.”

Kazami thought about the past as she watched Shinjou frantically read through the documents.

…Kaku just lied.

After all, she had been the one to teach him to read Japanese.

The first term she had taught him was “Kaku” and the first one he had learned himself was “Chisato”.

It’s been two years since then, she thought while the scenery ahead began to slope down.

Sayama’s classmate named Harakawa lived at the end of this road after an intersection with another road.

She had attended elementary school next to the river down below, so it had been a while since she had seen this scenery. Once they reached the elementary school, she would be able to see her house in the residential area across the river.

As Shinjou walked down the slope as if pushed along by her travel bag, she suddenly looked up from the documents.

Her eyebrows were raised in surprise.

“Um, it’s true. I can read what’s written here now. That’s amazing, Sayama-kun!”

“Ha ha ha! Praise me more, Shinjou-kun.”

“Chisato, I have a feeling being able to read it has nothing to do with Sayama being amazing.”

“Shh. Receiving food from its master is one of the joys of a pet.”

“I-I am not a pet! I’m the one giving him food!”

“Does that mean I am your pet, Shinjou-kun? In that case, I request that you groom me, bathe me, and let me sleep in your bed on a daily basis. How about that?”

“You should probably go ahead and get him fixed,” cut in Izumo.

Meanwhile, Kazami took the documents from Shinjou.

After taking the copy paper, she leaned forward as if to cover

Izumo's back. She reached over his shoulders to hold the documents where they could both see them.

"Look, can you read it, Kaku?"

"Hm? Oh, a bit to the right. Good, now a little lower. Yes, right there. That puts your breasts in a nice calming- I give, I give, I give! I'm gonna fall! No choking!"

Kazami clicked her tongue and released the chokehold. She looked forward and found Sayama and Shinjou glaring at her.

"Pressing your breasts against him, groping, and embracing all in broad daylight? What an indecent couple."

"A chokehold is not an embrace! And if you want to see groping, it's more like this!"

Letting Izumo say anything more would just cause more problems, so Kazami silenced him.

She flipped through the documents and indeed found the 5th-Gear investigation report to be readable.

However, it was written in English.

She frowned at the fact that it was not in Japanese, but then Shinjou tilted her head.

"Can you read it, Kazami-san? I couldn't read much."

"Yes, not only can I perceive the writing, I can actually read it. You might not expect it, but I know English. …Anyway, the report was written by Richard Thunderson. He was from American UCAT, right?"

Shinjou looked impressed and Kazami gave a bitter smile in return. She wondered if Shinjou would think of her more as an upperclassman now.

Kazami went on to read the report on 5th-Gear.

"5th-Gear was originally a world with two planets. It had no outer space and was surrounded by a sky filled with air."

Its concept of gravity made it a world of "falling" rather than of normal gravity. A civilization of flying by falling was quickly established and people began travelling between the two planets.

"However, they created two powerful weapons for the Concept War. A Concept War self-defense base was created on one of the two planets and the self-evolving combat mechanical dragon named Black Sun was left there. The other planet was used to manufacture weapons and the self-evolving weather control mechanical dragon

named White Creation was left there for the people who had been evacuated to there."

"I believe this continues with a 'but'," commented Sayama.

Kazami nodded.

"Black Sun had been ordered to fight and protect the people, but after evolving, it had doubts about how its own military base of a planet was sending those people to the battlefield. It concluded that, if the base did not exist, the people would not go to die and they would not kill the people of other Gears, so it forced the people to evacuate and destroyed the very planet it was meant to protect."

And…

"Black Sun then found a way to completely end all conflict and bring peace. That was to destroy the remaining planet and the weapons it contained."

Shinjou gulped at what she had read, but Sayama merely nodded and spoke.

"The two planets were destroyed in the early stages of the Concept War. 5th-Gear became a land where the wreckage of the planets floated in a vast sky and the change in atmospheric pressure brought the people to extinction. The only way Black Sun could protect itself from the contradictory actions it had taken was to evolve into an out-of-control weapon."

"Then the black mechanical dragon from last night was probably Black Sun, wasn't it?" asked Shinjou.

However, Sayama lightly crossed his arms and did not nod.

"Is that really the best way of putting it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"There is an addition at the end of the report. Black Sun was destroyed off the coast of Hokkaido but escaped deep under the ocean while White Creation and the other mechanical dragons all vanished. 5th-Gear was then destroyed by Richard Thunderson." Sayama tilted his head. "Based on what we know, the mechanical dragon from last night was Black Sun or Tezcatlipoca from South American mythology, but it has evolved and resurrected itself after sixty years. Meanwhile, the mechanical dragon named White Creation that corresponds to Quetzalcoatl is currently missing. But where did White Creation and the others go and how did Thunderson-san bring about 5th-Gear's destruction. Both of those

mysteries remain."

Kazami suddenly recalled a certain fact.

"Do you think 5th-Gear's Concept Core is inside those two mechanical dragons? Half of it is said to be stored in UCAT as a powerful weapon, isn't it?"

"But is that powerful weapon a mechanical dragon?" asked Shinjou. "If it was, wouldn't they just call it one?"

"In that case, there may have been something more to 5th-Gear than just those two mechanical dragons," said Sayama.

"Hmm," thought Kazami while cheerfully thinking how much more fun a conversation was with plenty of people. "But who are we supposed to hold 5th-Gear's Leviathan Road with?"

"The old man refused to tell me that. I think he plans to tell us once the negotiations with 4th are complete. It may be with the weapon held by UCAT or White Creation may still live. He said Thunderson-san was to be involved in 5th's Leviathan Road, so it is also possible American UCAT's inspector will guide us to our negotiation partner." Sayama remained expressionless. "But American UCAT has remained silent ever since sending their temporary inspectors. …What do you think about that?"

"It sounds dangerous to me. Thunderson-san was supposed to be cooperative as one of the Eight Great Dragon Kings, but can we say the same for the temporary inspectors American UCAT has chosen?"

"If Thunderson-san had lived, we would have known everything including why he had come to Japan, but that cannot be changed now."

After everyone exchanged a glance and nodded, Kazami shrugged.

"There's just so much to worry about. For one, we don't know where the other half of 5th's Concept Core is. If the black mechanical dragon named Black Sun has it, it might have recovered its strength by the next time we see it."

Shinjou also shrugged and she opened her mouth with a relaxed expression.

"But that footage your transport plane took showed the mechanical dragon was over three hundred meters long. …If we fought that, it would be like a monster movie. Sayama-kun, you

know about monster movies, right? They have those huge monsters like Whalerilla which was a combination of a whale and a gorilla to symbolize its strength."

"Ha ha ha. It's time you came back from the past, Shinjou-kun. Later, I will show you a mysterious movie in which the piano wire is not visible at all. It is even on a black disk that resembles a CD."

"C'mon, Sayama-kun. Stop trying to trick me. A movie would never fit on something like a CD. You need something as long and thick as a tape."

"Sayama," said Kazami in exasperation. "As her roommate, you need to teach Shinjou more about the modern age."

Kazami then looked forward. They had reached the end of the downward slope and the four lanes of Old Itsukaichi Road cut across in front of them. The narrow road they were on continued straight on after the intersection.

"Harakawa-kun lives in the old apartment building at the end there, right?" asked Shinjou.

Suddenly, Baku looked up from Sayama's head. Kazami saw the creature look at the documents in her hand.

"Hm?"

She tilted her head and Baku did so as well.

A moment later, the past opened up before her eyes.

●

Shinjou found herself in a dimly-lit space.

Her experiences immediately told her she was in the past.

...But when in the past?

No one was going to answer her question, so she looked around in search of the answer.

It was a large concrete space that measured one hundred meters in each direction. She saw small lights installed on the walls, pillars with cranes and winches installed near the walls, and large boxes filled with tools.

In addition to that, several large objects were visible in the space.

...Fighter planes with propellers?

The floor in the back was sloped and she saw a shutter for heading up and out. She belatedly realized the space had no windows.

“This is an underground hangar.”

Once she made that realization, she looked to the airplanes. They were all smaller than the fighters and transport planes she had seen on UCAT’s runway and their emblems were not all the same.

Some said Izumo Company, some said US-UCAT, and others said GER-UCAT or CHI-UCAT. She could think of only one place all those would have gathered.

“Japanese UCAT after the war. This is in Sayama-kun’s grandfather’s time.”

But why am I being shown this past? she wondered while tilting her non-existent head.

She tried walking from the wall left of the exit to the opposite metal wall.

“Huh?”

She found something strange at the bottom of the metal wall before her.

They were blades.

A mechanical component the size of a small car had three blades extending from it.

Each blade was thicker and longer than her own body, they were white, and they reflected the dim light coming from the wall.

“Claws?”

She took a quick step back which expanded her field of vision and she looked up at what she had assumed was a wall.

She found it was actually a dragon.

It was a mechanical dragon. The blue and white mechanical dragon sat on a large transportation pallet.

It was so large that she could only call it gigantic. It was over three times as long as the fighters and she guessed it was at least thirty meters.

It was hunkered down so it just barely fit below the ceiling, but nothing could be done about its length. It looked like it was simply sitting still so as not to be in the way.

…What is this mechanical dragon?

She had heard that American UCAT had been researching mechanical dragons as far back as before World War Two and that they could currently deploy them for combat.

However, the mechanical dragon before her eyes looked like it

was from an entirely different civilization than the airplanes next to it.

Its moving parts were made large yet complexly, the armor appeared to cling to it rather than being riveted on, and there was no sign of any part having been welded.

“What is this?”

She then noticed a man was sitting on the floor near what appeared to be the dragon’s face.

He had blond hair and blue eyes, he held a bottle of yellow liquid in his right hand, and he spoke while facing the dragon.

“So when you get down to it, what are you?”

Shinjou’s mind heard the answer.

The answer came in the form of sound.

“I do not know. I simply found myself flying through the sky in this body.”

The sound was produced from the mechanical dragon’s throat.

…He’s talking with the dragon.

Shinjou had her mind run over to the two of them. *Um,* she thought as she tried to figure out where to stop. She chose the airplane next to them and stopped below the upwards-curving wing of the propeller plane. She sat her mind down on the landing tire.

She faced forward as the dragon continued speaking to the man.

“At first, I did not know who I was. I only knew that I was flying through the sky. No, I did not even have the word ‘sky’ back then, so I was flying through empty space. As I flew, I found others like me and managed to speak with them. Once we were able to look at each other, we realized something.”

The dragon raised its head slightly, opened the windshield, and exposed the empty cockpit.

“Our heads are empty.”

“Sounds like a horror story.”

“I do not know the meaning of that term. …But as we investigated, we managed to operate the structures inside us and found that our bodies would move on their own. The one being experimented on suddenly took off at full speed and caused a fair bit of damage.”

“Sounds like you were pretty reckless. A lot like we used to be.”

The man laughed a bit and the dragon lowered its head.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Oh, so you understand laughter? …I wasn’t laughing at you. I was laughing at my old memories. I call them old, but it was only a year ago.”

“So short-lived races refer to recent events as ‘old’.”

“Will that help you understand this world? Anyway, how did the investigation of yourselves go?”

“Well, we guessed that something was meant to fill that empty space and pilot us. That meant we were meant to be used and our masters were gone for some reason.”

“Gone?”

“We quickly found the reason. There were small pieces of rock floating in the air that we would use to rest on, but the observations taken by my many companions allowed us to guess that they had originally been one single object. Most likely, the place in which our masters lived was destroyed and only we remained.”

“And what destroyed that place?”

“We do not know the details, but an enemy soon appeared. It was a black dragon much larger than us. He attacked and shot down a few of us. However, a giant white dragon quickly appeared to help us.”

Once the dragon finished speaking, Shinjou heard another sound. The man grabbed the bottle sitting next to him and brought it to his mouth.

As the contents foamed, he spoke.

“Sorry. I got some answers I expected and some I didn’t.”

“What is that liquid?”

“It’s made by fermenting grains such as wheat. Have you never heard of alcohol?”

“I have heard it is a combustible compound. It must function as your fuel. How very interesting.”

“Let’s just leave it at that and continue. So what was that giant white dragon?”

“He called himself White Creation and told us to take identifiers that indicated why we existed. In other words, names. Thunderson, these were the same as the series of sounds and letters that you use.”

The man, Thunderson, brought the bottle to his mouth again and

then rested his chin on his hand.

"Did your names give you power? Do you have a concept like 2nd-Gear?"

"No, that is not what they were for. They were to distinguish between our existences and our roles. We are machines meant to be used, so our masters give us identifiers to tell us apart and they give us permission to make full use of our abilities. But without any masters, we are given no names and we cannot release the limits on our abilities. However, we wished to avoid destruction," said the dragon. "Both Black Sun and White Creation had been given names by our lost masters, but they were no longer around to give us names. That was why White Creation used his power to open a gate to this world."

"Wait," said Thunderson as he held out his left palm and looked directly at the mechanical dragon. "So you were given names by…?"

"By the people of this world, yes. Using your units, I believe it was over 1500 years ago. I could not grasp the pronunciation perfectly, but I chose the name Xolotl for myself. It was this world's word for the Evening Star. This makes my third time to be restored, so I now go by Xolotl 3."

"Have you been fighting all this time?"

"Yes, but Black Sun is stubborn. He and White Creation both possess a half of our world's Concept Core. When we corner him, he flees to this world."

"…"

"When half of the Concept Core is lost, the world is destroyed. In the instant Black Sun leaves, our world begins to crumble and we must end our pursuit."

"So that's it."

"That is what?"

Thunderson looked up at the ceiling as he spoke.

"James was right. That thing is being pursued by all of you, so it distracts itself by hunting the weak here and then returns to your world before it's destroyed, right?"

"Have you met Black Sun?"

"I wasn't able to catch up."

"That is for the best," said Xolotl 3 quietly.

Thunderson frowned, but the dragon continued.

"You must have concluded that your world's technology cannot stand up to Black Sun."

"Hey."

"Richard Thunderson, I made a few mistakes on my way here. My first was when I fought Black Sun six years ago and was shot down in this world. My second was being captured here and yet remaining behind and protecting the people here from that sudden concept battle that occurred when you brought me back to my crash site."

And…

"I assisted you on the advice of 3rd-Gear's Rhea and placed this world's 'mankind' within the effective scope of my name."

"The effective scope of your name?"

"That means the power I can use by the name of the Evening Star applies to you as well as my companions. And with that said, I still say that you cannot stand up to Black Sun."

"Are you saying you can?"

The blue and white dragon moved in response to Thunderson's question.

It raised its body a little and produced the sound of moving metal.

It revealed something below its belly. It was a long white cannon installed as if the dragon were carrying it in its arms.

"This is my personal weapon that can only be installed on me. To use your country's current language, it would be named the Vesper Cannon. According to White Creation, it is the only weapon that can directly pierce Black Sun's armor on its own."

"…"

"For some reason, this world has no concept power and I thus cannot refine fuel from the air. I was finally able to accumulate enough fuel to fly with Rhea's help, but my companions have surely been fighting in their own names the entire time. The time for me to fly is approaching and I will bring you to 5th-Gear, Thunderson."

"Why?"

"When you see the state of 5th-Gear, you will see what it means to make Black Sun your enemy. But do not worry. We will surely destroy Black Sun and then we must part ways until our world is destroyed."

The dragon faced Thunderson with white light in the sight devices that acted as eyes.

“When we first met, you ignored me when I asked if you were here to get information from me. You instead carried my pallet out under the blue sky and simply read a book. Why did you do that?”

“Hah. No real reason. Back then, I thought I might be able to use you to defeat Black Sun, but when I saw you, I realized you weren’t something that should be chained up in here.”

“An excellent decision.”

“And that’s why I decided to let you do what you wanted. At the very least, I wouldn’t keep my mechanical dragon holed up in a hangar if it had a mind of its own. So are we gonna go, Xolotl 3?”

“I do not yet have the power needed to pass through the gate, but once I do, I will go ahead, receive permission from my companions, and then return for you. If you then find records of 5th-Gear, we will go even further ahead. To use the phrase the one named Sayama taught me, I believe we are on our way to the destination of our resolve.”

Shinjou heard a bitter laugh and her vision grew dark.

The past was beginning to end.

She sat up from the landing leg she had been sitting on and she looked at Thunderson.

…Huh?

She noticed something strange about the bottle in his right hand.

He had brought it to his mouth a few times during the conversation.

“But the amount inside hasn’t changed.”

He was only pretending to drink and she closed her mental eyes as she wondered why.

…There must be something.

Something that he would have been unable to say or unable to keep quiet if he had not been pretending to do so.

As she realized she had done the same thing in the past, her mind fell into darkness.

A moment later, the past ended.

Chapter 6

“Door of Misapprehension”

Something is coming
It is based in misunderstanding
But it brings the truth closer

●

Harakawa faced the futon in the living room.

It was curled up like a turtle on the tatami mat floor and a blonde girl's head was sticking out.

"How long are you going to do this, Heo Thunderson?"

"Until my clothes dry."

He noticed a small bit of strength in her voice.

After he had returned, she had jumped into the futon and had been crying for about ten minutes now.

It had been plenty of time for him to realize what it meant for the washing machine to have entered the spin cycle.

…I can't tell if she's considerate, unrestrained, or just stupid.

As he thought, he saw her raise her head. Her eyebrows were slightly lowered, but there were no more tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said weakly. "I'm just being a bother, so I'll leave once my clothes dry."

"As long as you understand. I really do have to get to school."

He stood up, removed the apartment key from his motorcycle keychain, and placed it on the living room table. As he did, the stones making up his bracelet clacked together.

"Ah," said Heo. "Um, Harakawa?"

"What is it?"

"Um… Did you happen to see a necklace made of stones like that?"

He thought about what she meant. He had seen nothing of the sort when he had taken her in last night, he had not seen it when removing her clothes and dressing her, and he had not found it when searching her pockets for some kind of identification.

"No, I didn't see anything like that. Do you want this?"

"N-no, that isn't what I meant," she said. "But I got it from my mother."

"Is that so? That's the same as me."

"Eh?"

She tilted her head and he showed her his bracelet.

"My mother makes these as a hobby. She always loved these kinds of crafts and she seems to think of them like protective charms. If yours is the same…"

He was going to say “I hope you find it”, but he swallowed the words.

…Why am I getting even more involved?

“…”

He stood up without saying a word more, turned his back to Heo, and began to leave the living room.

He suddenly found himself curious about the look on her face behind him.

…What a lovely story.

He only now realized this was much like taking in a cat. He did not know what she was thinking, but she would cause problems when he was careless and escape to some comfortable place if he was more cautious.

He gathered his thoughts, and asked a question with his back turned.

“What were you running from last night?”

“Eh? Oh, that was…well…a demon.”

I see, he thought while finally making up his mind. *She really is a dangerous girl.*

If she were a cat, this was like taking in one with distemper. He had carelessly given her food that morning, he had given her the bath for grooming, and she had now taken the sleeping space for herself, but he would do nothing else for her. If she had given a different answer to his question, he might have brought to the police for help, but he could only sigh and leave the living room.

He then heard the futon move behind him.

He turned and saw Heo with the futon gathered around her like a gown.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, uh, I thought I would see you off.”

“Just stay there,” he replied with a frown.

But then a sudden knock came to the front door and a boy’s sharp voice entered the room.

“Dan Harakawa! We have your apartment surrounded from a single direction! Come out this very instant!”

“S-Sayama-kun, that doesn’t count as being surrounded.”

“We are simply using different definitions, Shinjou-kun. …Okay, Harakawa. Hurry on out. If you do not, I will greet you! Good

morning, commoners!!! Oh, no. I have such a superhuman love of people that I greeted the entire public rather than just you. What am I doing!?"

…An idiot has arrived.

Once he came to that single realization, Harakawa emptied his mind of thought.

Several problems had just occurred at the same moment and he would panic if he tried to think about them all at once.

He had two primary things to think about: the idiot outside the door and Heo.

Heo was currently giving him a confused look.

"Um, Harakawa? My Japanese isn't good enough to understand what that person is saying."

"That proves that your Japanese is excellent, Heo Thunderson."

Harakawa recalled a dangerous fact about his return to the apartment.

…I was only going to return the key, so I didn't lock the door.

Just as he cursed his carelessness, he heard another voice from outside.

"Huh? Harakawa-kun, the door isn't locked."

"Hey, wait, Chisato. It looks like the door's open. Stop preparing to break it down with a flying kick."

"Eh? I-I wasn't preparing for anything. I just wanted to practice my running start."

"Ha ha ha. At any rate, we have quite a careless boy on our hands. We need to do the considerate thing and drag him out."

…You're coming in? And why are the student council president and treasurer here too?

Harakawa gave a shout to hold them off and buy some time.

"I'm just about to leave! Don't come in!"

"Ha ha ha. Did you hear that, Shinjou-kun? Harakawa just lied."

"Don't just assume that without question!!"

He had two options: lock the door now, or…

"H-Harakawa, if they come in, they'll see me naked."

…Or hide this girl.

He had no idea what would happen if it came out that he was late for school because he had a naked blonde girl in his apartment. The Weekly Rose Taka had been doing quite well recently and had

increased its copies sold within the school with an extra edition dedicated to scandals.

The safest option was to lock the door and hide Heo somewhere before they broke through the lock.

However, his options were instantly cut in half.

The doorknob had been turned.

"…!"

Rather than making an actual decision, his reflexes kicked in and he picked Heo up.

"Eh? Ah…hyan!"

With a weak cry, she pulled back her shoulders and the futon fell away.

"Moron! Don't drop it!"

"B-but you grabbed me in a place that's sensitive thanks to that strange shampoo."

He tried not to think about what that meant as he ran across the room with her in his arms. He reached the closet on the west side of the living room, opened the sliding door with his foot, and set his sights on the bottom shelf. It contained a spare futon and…

"There are snacks in the back, so eat something."

He tossed Heo inside and she gave another shriek.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

Before he could answer, the front door opened.

At the same time, he closed the sliding closet door.

The sound of the sliding door hitting the column and the sound of the student council members stepping inside occurred simultaneously.

Silence then fell.

He turned and did indeed see those four famous students standing in his front door.

"Why are you here?"

Shinjou nodded while holding a travel bag in one hand.

"Ooki-sensei says you need to attend class."

"I was just about to leave. Can't you see I'm wearing my uniform?"

"Harakawa, can you prove that is not a school uniform style of pajamas?"

"Sayama, can you prove you are not completely insane for asking

that?”

Hearing that, Shinjou hung her head.

“No, he can’t.”

“Ha ha ha. You are exactly right, Shinjou-kun. Harakawa cannot prove those clothes are not pajamas.”

“I wasn’t replying to you!!”

Harakawa relaxed his shoulders.

…So it’s only a pointless visit.

As soon as he realized that, Kazami spoke.

“Was there someone in here? I thought I heard people speaking.”

Izumo then asked a question of Harakawa who stood motionless in front of the closet’s sliding door.

“And when we came in…Harakawa, was it? Anyway, did you throw something in there that looked a lot like a person?”

Sweat slowly appeared on Harakawa’s back.

…This is dangerous.

He then heard a whispering voice from beyond the sliding door.

“U-um, Harakawa. It’s dark in here. Hot and stuffy, too.”

He ignored her. She was whispering, so she seemed to understand why he had thrown her in there. She would also be hesitant to leave because she was naked.

The current problem was how to escape the fact that they had seen her.

“That was…”

He thought, but there was not much that was human-sized and human-colored.

…Not much other than an actual human.

Just as he thought it was hopeless, he heard Sayama’s voice.

“I seriously doubt it, but was it a life-sized figure?”

He just barely kept himself from calling Sayama an idiot and instead nodded.

“What if it was?”

“There is nothing wrong with it. Everyone has their own preferences, after all. I have been thinking about making one myself.”

“What kind of one?”

“One of Shinjou-kun, of course.”

He looked over and saw Shinjou blushing and saying, “Eh?

Really?” After seeing those two eccentric boys, he relaxed a little.

…I see.

The group here was apparently even more unusual than he had thought. Even if he had made a life-sized figure, it was still on too small a scale to match them.

But Kazami destroyed that relaxation.

“Then why did I hear talking?”

Harakawa groaned.

This was a second crisis and he could not talk his way out of it this time. A conversation was more than enough to prove that he was hiding a person.

What do I do? he asked himself. *Should I bring Heo out and tell the truth? And should I tell them I’m not sure what to do about it either?*

…What do I do!?

He clenched his teeth and saw Izumo crouch down, tilt his head, and whisper to Kazami.

“Hey, Chisato. You should probably stop that. I bet he’s a sad kind of person who talks to his dolls like Old Man Ooshiro.”

For the second time, Harakawa had to stop himself from calling someone an idiot, but he also felt it would be for the best if they settled on that.

“And look carefully, Chisato,” continued Izumo. “There’s a futon in the middle of the living room, right? He must’ve been using the doll to…y’know.”

“Y-you’re right, Kaku.”

Kazami whispered back, glanced toward the kitchen, and quickly looked away.

She pulled Izumo’s collar closer and whispered some more.

“Hey, Kaku. Look in the kitchen but make sure he doesn’t notice. A girl’s clothes and underwear are drying in there. They must be for dressing it up. …I really shouldn’t have expected a normal person to be Sayama’s friend.”

“Y’know…” Shinjou joined in the whispering and looked troubled. “I’m really surprised that Harakawa-kun is into that kind of thing. B-but I guess everyone is entitled to their personal preferences.”

…I never thought I’d *be hearing that from* you.

However, that used up everything they could use to question him

further.

Feeling mentally exhausted, he left the closet door. He now had to drive them out as quickly as possible. To pretend nothing was out of the ordinary, he picked up the fallen futon and slowly folded it.

As he did, he glanced over at the others.

"Get out already. I'll be right to school."

"Oh, we do not mind waiting here, Harakawa. Also, your laundry has yet to dry and the washing machine is still spinning. If we let you use that as an excuse to skip school, we would be unable to look Ooki-sensei in the eye."

Harakawa glared at Sayama's expressionless face.

"Do not worry about us," continued the boy. "If you can give us some tea, that will suffice."

●

Heo crouched down in the darkness.

This isn't good. This isn't good, she thought twice while holding her knees.

She did not like or dislike the darkness, but she did not much like being thrown into it against her will.

She had never been punished like that even when she had done something wrong. She would instead be thrown outside and she would have no choice but to run through the fields for fun.

In her memories, contrails always filled the sky.

Her mother had only ever told her that her father was a pilot. That had been long ago when she had still been in Japan, but she had very few memories of that time.

…What am I supposed to do?

Outside the closet, Harakawa was speaking with the friends who had arrived. The conversation had a dangerous edge to it that had been absent when he had spoken with her.

She found it nice to be able to sense his emotions. She could tell he was trying to get rid of her, but she also wished there was some kind of feeling behind it.

…That's asking for too much.

Not even she could believe what had happened the night before, but he had heard her out and accepted that *something* had happened. She told herself that was enough.

However, it was hot. It may have been due to the sun coming out, her own body temperature, the enclosed space, or a combination of them all, but it was horribly hot and stuffy in the closet.

She curiously touched the futon below her butt and found it was damp with sweat.

I wonder if he'll scold me, she thought while shrinking back.

When she pressed her back against the back of the closet, she could tell her sweat was soaking into the thin wooden wall.

It was a little hard to breath.

This isn't good, she thought again while noticing her throat felt a bit dry.

…But if I left, it would cause trouble for Harakawa.

She had already caused him enough trouble and he had been fairly considerate, so she had to endure for the moment.

Still, it was hot, so she closed her eyes and let out a breath.

She held her own body, gathered the sweat between her fingers, and moved it down her skin. She felt as if something were rolling down her side and waist. It tickled.

"Nn…"

She let out a voice and she heard speaking outside the closet.

"Huh? Did you just hear a strange voice, Sayama-kun?"

"I assumed you made it, Shinjou-kun."

…O-oh, no.

She shrank back further, her pulse quickened bit, and she had even more difficulty breathing.

She had not done anything, and yet sweat poured down her forehead.

This isn't good, she thought a third time.

She had worked up a sweat running last night and now this. She felt her body was starting to sweat more easily. In school, she had learned that Japan had a warm and damp climate. She had also learned Japan's famous giant Buddha statues were mostly half naked because the country was as hot and humid as a sauna.

And in health class, she had learned that people died when they lost an extreme amount of water.

…Will I die if this keeps up?

She wanted hydration, so she wished she could have absorbed the shower water like a plant. Or perhaps she should have drunk the

water.

"…"

She suddenly groped around in the hopes of finding something.

She found a shelf along the closet wall. A large shelf covered the entire wall and it contained lots of paperback books, but she did not need them now. However, she did wonder why they were there.

As she wondered and continued searching, she felt a slightly hard bag below the shelf. She realized it contained junk food and a possible flavor came to mind.

…My throat.

Thinking of the famous super-spicy flavor named "My Saltiness" had been a mistake. She had once had a horrible experience when her great-grandfather had bought it as a joke.

She wondered if there was anything to drink. Harakawa had said she could eat something, so if there were drinks to go with it…

"…"

She found it. She stopped breathing for a moment when she felt the metal can between the bags of junk food.

It was a 350 mL can of something. The shape told her it was a drink and not boiled mackerels, sardines in oil, or spam.

…Thank goodness.

She held the can in both hands and curled up against the wall. She lowered her head in silent thanks and slowly tugged on the pull-tab. To muffle the noise as much as possible, she folded up an edge of the futon and pressed the can against it as she opened it.

The quiet sound of carbonation was enough for her to feel the refreshment, so she smiled in the darkness.

She then realized her smile was tilting.

…Ah.

She was losing her balance. Her dehydration was catching up to her, so her body was not working properly.

Oh, no, she thought.

She wanted to leave today, hopefully find the necklace her mother had given her, and head to the station, but she could not do any of it if she collapsed again.

…And I'll cause more trouble for Harakawa.

She hung her head and forcibly shook it.

She decided to drink. The flavor of the drink would likely focus

her and hydrating herself would steady her and allow her to leave.

She brought the can to her mouth and drank.

"…"

Her throat told her it was very bitter and she almost choked.

"…"

She held her throat and gulped.

After letting out a slow breath, she looked at the can in her hands.

She could not see it well in the darkness, but she knew what the contents tasted like.

…What is this incredibly bitter carbonated drink?

At a school she had transferred to before, she had drunk some soda water to help loosen her throat before a choir recital. It had been flavorless but had stung her throat. The ginger ale she had drunk at a gas station while moving to a new home with her great-grandfather had had a rocky flavor that was almost spicy.

However, this strange bitterness was different from both of those.

What is it? What is it? she thought twice.

Harakawa was only a little older than her, so she doubted his sense of taste was all that different from hers. She also doubted a canned drink could go bad, so she tried another sip.

…It really is bitter.

It tasted the same as before. She wondered if there were any other drinks, but Harakawa probably would not like it if she opened another without finishing this one.

She felt it was her responsibility, so she took another drink.

It was bitter and it smelled like medicine when she brought it under her nose.

…B-but it isn't so bad I can't drink it.

It was better than collapsing, so she slowly drank it.

The closet was still hot and she had been sweating quite a lot since she had started on the drink. She guessed the liquid had allowed her body to relax and let out the sweat.

Her pulse sounded loud too, but she guessed that was due to the heat.

She knew she had to get more liquid inside her, so she endured the bitterness and drank more from the can.

After leaving only a third of the contents, she lost to the

carbonation and removed the can from her mouth.

…It's so hot.

However, she was not referring to the general temperature. When she felt her forehead, she found sweat and heat.

…Oh, no.

She did not know what was happening, but she had been sweating an awful lot and she was finding it even harder to breath.

She wondered if she was sick.

No matter how many times she thought "this isn't good", it was not going to help. Harakawa was still speaking with his friends outside the closet. When she realized his voice was not directed at her, tears suddenly spilled from her eyes.

…I can't.

To suppress her voice, she brought the can back to her mouth.

She drank more, but the heat did not leave her. Her entire body felt warm and sweaty.

"Nn…"

No longer able to resist, she collapsed. She rotated her body slowly and silently and she took a crawling position on top of the futon.

The movement spilled the gathered sweat from her back, her hips, and between her thighs.

She realized this was not normal and wondered if her repeated dehydrations had messed something up.

…Am I done for?

She propped herself up on her elbows and drank the rest of the can to get the last bit of liquid from it.

She had done everything she could, so she let out a fairly rough breath and let air in between her body and the futon by spreading her knees and lifting her butt. She pressed her face against the futon to muffle her heavy breathing and she clenched the futon cover with both hands to put up with the oppressive heat.

"Nn…"

She gently twisted her body and felt her consciousness slipping away.

…No.

Her knowledge of wintertime mountain-climbing told her going to sleep meant death, but she still closed her eyes.

She then heard a voice outside the closet.

It was Harakawa's voice and it seemed they had been discussing their work schedules.

"Sayama, you work part-time in Okutama, right? Your job's related to IAI, isn't it?"

"Yes, Shinjou-kun and the two behind me work at the same place."

"That doesn't matter. I'm interested in a department or something called UCAT. Ever heard of it?"

Even as she sank into her pounding pulse and sweat, Heo's mind snapped into focus when she heard that question.

…Harakawa.

She was relieved that he was trying to help her and the answer came after a short pause.

"Yes, I have. Let us just say it is one of the workplaces within IAI there. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I just have something to deliver there. It's for my job."

"Is that so?" replied the other voice.

Heo breathed a mental sigh of relief.

…Everything will be okay.

She had a feeling she had heard someone say something similar recently, but she slowly fell asleep before she could remember where.

●

The ocean looked black from up in the vast blue sky.

A single giant object was located in that sky.

It had a long body made of black steel, it bent its body, and it used its giant wings to fly.

Rather than simply drifting, it actively slipped into the wind and would occasionally have fun by accelerating and breaking through the air.

It was a giant black mechanical dragon.

It had a certain thought while gazing upon the blue sky.

…The sky is so vast.

It did not know how long it had been doing this. Its memories began when it had suddenly found itself doing this.

It did not even know its name.

Perhaps it would be better to say I do not remember my name, it thought while flying.

It willfully flapped its metal wings to strike the heavy air and ascend.

As its giant body rose above the clouds, it thought some more.

…Such a lovely sky.

It remembered almost nothing about itself, but it had a few sensations that were not quite vague memories. One of those was the sensation of the sky.

The sky that faintly remained in its mind had not had the expanses of water and land below it like this one did. Or maybe it had. It could not remember.

However, it had a feeling it had flown through a sky that continued without end.

"…"

Either way, flying was a good thing.

This sky was blue and it would turn scarlet and darken at set intervals.

During the dark times, many specks of light were visible overhead. It had once continued to ascend in order to determine what those specks were, but it had been unable to reach them. Its propulsion device functioned by perceiving forward as down and then falling. Its wings were used for control and acceleration, but its functions seemed to be limited such that it could not fly in a space without air.

After ascending to a certain point during that attempt, the force it normally felt on its wings had vanished and it had suddenly felt like it was not flying. That had been boring, so it had quit.

It wondered if it would eventually be able to make that journey and enjoy the flight.

It knew that it evolved.

It evolved by strengthening while remaining itself and remaining metal.

It used the surrounding compounds to refine the same material it was made of and use that material to increase its own size.

It made high-speed calculations to design efficient parts for itself and then remade itself accordingly.

It could add weapons or anything else.

The process could also be described as making active improvements.

When it had first woken up, it had found the bottom of the ocean before its eyes. The extreme pressure of the water had left it unable to move and it had certainly never thought about flying.

It had been injured. Or perhaps “damaged” was the better word.

Most of the damage had healed while it slept, but a few areas had not been fixed. To see what kind of parts those would be once they were fixed, it had sent extra power to them. The parts had moved.

It had then realized it was a moving being.

The first part it had realized was a part of its body and moved was its front right leg. While it had gone on to move other parts, it had learned how to swim through the water by observing the small animals around it.

Once it had left the water’s ceiling, it had found itself floating in the air.

It had wondered what was going on and the previously useless parts on its back had opened up.

They had revealed themselves to be wings.

It had realized the opened wings were steadying its position in the air and the rest had gone smoothly.

It had flown freely through the sky to test itself and it had evolved under the extreme pressure of the deep sea.

It had continued that powerful evolution as if it were its duty and that evolution had been focused on two things: the ability to fly freely and the ability to fight.

Its enemy was clear.

Among the moving creatures on this world’s land was a false humanity.

It had a definition for “human” in its mind, so it had to have had some kind of relationship with them in the past. However, it thought of the ones in this world as fakes.

It had one major reason for this.

It believed humanity had been destroyed. That fact was burned strongly into its faint memories. There was clearly something wrong if the people had not been destroyed.

It did not know why it could be so sure of something from a fragment of a memory, but it knew how it had once felt about

humanity.

They had been important and it had wanted to protect them.

And it had another thought: it felt so strongly about humans and it was still alive, so surely the real humans were still alive somewhere.

It thought there had to be something that would make them appear before it again.

But what would that be?

"…"

It wanted to protect the humans, but those humans were gone and fake humans filled the world.

That led it to a certain conclusion. If it were to remove those fake humans and create a place for the real humans, would the real humans come to where it was so it could protect them again?

Would they praise it for having prepared a world for them and waiting for them?

"…"

It flew through the sky.

It wanted the time for the black sky to arrive. Black was its own color. It was a color of nothingness, the color of its powerful armor, and the color of the deep sea where it had awoken. It would use that color to remove the fake humans and it would evolve and prepare to fight.

It desired the evolution of its black wings so it could search for the real humans.

It had started to detect a nostalgic scent recently. That scent had also appeared once before it had fully awoken, but it was much stronger now.

The previous night had been especially amazing. While flying over the water while the sky was black, that scent had filled the air.

It had been so very nostalgic.

It had flown toward the scent and found the eastern side of a nearby archipelago. A small concept space had been set up there, it had altered the space to its own liking in order to hide itself, and it had found a man inside.

The old man of the fake humans had desired to fight and it had responded in kind.

After exchanging a single blow each, the man had ceased to function.

The old man had smiled.

It did not know the meaning of that smile, but it had understood what he had said as they fought.

“Black Sun.”

It knew the name the man had spoken. That name had been in its faint memories, but it had not known to whom it referred and the name had been left undefined.

The nostalgic scent had then vanished.

It did not know if the scent had vanished because the old man had stopped moving or if the scent had left to go elsewhere. More importantly, an even greater nostalgic scent had pressed in and drowned out the previous one.

An intense sense of nostalgia had washed over it.

The scent had come from the west of the island that it had landed on that night and that was located next to the ocean it always slept in.

Once its evolution had settled in, it knew it had to visit that place.

It more or less knew what the scent was. It was the scent of the world it had been born in and it was the scent of whatever had once destroyed it and put it to sleep.

“…!”

It roared.

It raised its wings, lifted the body surrounded by its armor, and roared into the sky.

It felt nothing could stand up to it now.

It evolved without hesitation and desired to fight.

And it was all for the faint memories inside itself.

Chapter 7

“Departing Pace”

You are waiting
For someone to stand beside you

●

A large space filled four or five stories of a building. It was twenty meters wide and over one hundred meters long, it was air conditioned, and it was lit.

Customers with travel bags walked along the tile floor that reflected the lights on the high ceiling.

It was an airport.

The front of the airport spelled out Narita in the English alphabet.

It handled domestic flights and was currently in the slow period of midday.

Many pre-autumn travelers and office workers on business trips had left the entrance during the morning, but now the airport was simply gathering the afternoon customers as if taking a breather.

Amid those customers was a boy in a blue suit who held two bags.

He was Sayama.

He stood by the wall near the restroom next to the entrance.

He checked the watch on his right wrist and the hands indicated it was 12:10.

“Our flight to Kyushu leaves at 1:10, so we need to enter the lobby before long.”

However, Shinjou was not leaving the restroom.

He of course assumed she had her reasons and he folded his arms along with Baku on his head.

“Well, there is no need to rush. Izumo, Kazami, and the others can handle the rest, so we only need to visit the 4th-Gear reservation in Kyushu.”

They had remained in Harakawa’s apartment until noon approached, but they had been unable to dislodge him from his room before they had to leave. He had insisted he had preparations to take care of, but Sayama had other suspicions.

…Heo Thunderson is undoubtedly there.

He did not know why she was there, but the various pieces of evidence they had seen in his apartment, the mention of UCAT, and his continued refusal to leave had settled the matter. He had informed Kazami of his suspicion and it turned out she had been thinking the same thing.

…So she will be monitoring Harakawa’s apartment with Izumo.

However, there was one thing Sayama did not understand. If his suspicion proved accurate, why was Harakawa hiding Heo Thunderson? His thoughts soon turned in a direction he found unlikely.

"Could he have abducted her? It would be unfortunate to find one of our classmates is a sexual criminal."

But I need to trust my classmate, he thought while saving the number for Akigawa's police department in his phone.

He sighed and checked his watch again. Five minutes had passed since last time.

…It has been fifteen minutes since Shinjou-kun entered the restroom.

She had told him to wait here and she must have been in a hurry because her face had been flushed and she had brought her bag with her. Fifteen minutes had passed since then, but there was still no sign of her.

A few businessmen in suits had entered in that time, but they had all soon exited.

Sayama thought while nodding to one of those men who left with a quick pace.

…Are the Japanese in too much of a hurry these days?

His grandfather had once told him people needed to slow down a little. Sayama had opted to help in that matter by nailing the door shut in seventeen different places when his grandfather had entered the restroom, but when he had returned from the bookstore, he had found a human-shaped hole in the door.

That was when Sayama had realized that slowing down allowed you to build up your power.

…Is Shinjou-kun building up her gauge as well?

He was not sure, but Shinjou had never shown this sort of behavior in the dorm and he had never taught it to her.

Also, there was a lot he had to teach her before getting to this building up of power.

…After all, carelessly building up power is dangerous.

He nodded and folded his arms along with Baku. He thought about what Shinjou was doing.

After about ten seconds of thought, he reached the logical conclusion.

“She has been caught in the middle of some sort of crime!”

What should I do? he wondered.

Shinjou was in danger inside, but he could not allow the criminal to detect his own actions as he went to save her.

“I just hope I was not too late to catch on.”

He swung his right arm and a screwdriver and wrench set fell from the sleeve and into his hand.

“No, even if something has happened, I cannot open it right away. And if she realizes it is me, she will likely put herself at risk to avoid causing me any trouble.”

He swung his left arm and a set containing a stethoscope and portable recorder fell from the sleeve and into his hand.

He looked at the tools in his hands and nodded.

“Good,” he muttered. “First, I need to silently determine the situation inside and then I can break in.”

He entered the restroom with his travel bags. Based on the footsteps he had heard, Shinjou had entered the men’s restroom.

He entered the restroom and found a space with five stalls and tulips.

A few office workers who had finished their business looked at Sayama, but he ignored them and began checking the stalls. He walked silently, checked the state of the doors’ locks, and found one of them was closed.

…This is the one.

He lowered his travel bags, pulled white rubber gloves from his pocket, and put them on.

He had to confirm that Shinjou truly was inside the stall.

…If I was wrong, it would humiliate the customer inside.

With that thought, he pulled a small silver case from his pocket and produced a fine powder and brush from within.

He used the brush to apply some powder to the door handle and produced a fingerprint.

He pulled a memo from his pocket and compared the fingerprint to one of Shinjou’s he had taken in the past.

He had a match.

With no reason to hesitate, he crouched down and peered underneath the door.

…Her shoes.

He spotted Shinjou's blue shoes, but something was not right.

…She is not there.

Finding only her shoes made him decide he had to check on and record the situation inside as soon as possible.

He pulled a digital video camera from his travel bag. It was an IAI model and its special feature was the removable lens that could be attached elsewhere.

…Should I shoot from above or below?

He hesitated briefly, but he chose a low angle to give it a sense of realism. He set the camera to the floor, removed the lens, and placed the lens at an angle to look up from below the door.

He then pulled a black box of about ten centimeters from his travel bag. As he was travelling to Kyushu, he had visited UCAT's development department and borrowed a simple thermal sensor named "I can see the hot stuff!" or "Hottie" for short.

It was meant to be used by newlywed couples to accurately fry an egg in a covered frying pan, but it could detect the heat of the human body if the setting was on "Toasty".

It was small, so it could only be used on doors and only wooden ones if they were too thick.

…But it is enough for this.

When Sayama crouched down and pressed the device against the door, Hottie's LCD screen displayed the permeating heat.

While the device stabilized, he checked his surroundings.

All of the office workers who had finished their business gave him confused looks.

As he returned their looks, he had a sudden thought.

…Am I doing something strange right now?

He looked back at his own situation. Presently, he was crouched down next to a door, he had checked for fingerprints, he had set up a camera, and he was checking the interior using a thermal sensor. He also held a stethoscope in his left hand to hear any noise on the inside.

…Anyone who sees this can tell I am performing a detailed examination of the inside of the stall rather than peeping on or bugging someone.

He nodded, confident that his actions were straightforward and nothing to be ashamed of.

With an expression of absolute confidence, he gestured for the men to stay still.

After a moment, the confused office workers exchanged glances.

Sayama nodded toward them to ask if they understood and made a slow, downward-striking motion to tell them to remain silent as they left.

The office workers gave frantic and awkward nods. They all tightened their belts so as to make no unnecessary sound, gave him a nod, and tiptoed out of the bathroom.

Just before the last one left, the man stopped and gave Sayama a thumbs up.

Thinking that was a lot like Ooshiro, Sayama nodded back.

…I must make this mission a success so I do not betray their expectations.

He looked at Hottie and found the color had stabilized. The LCD screen showed the color green.

…That means there is nothing immediately past the door.

At the very least, the criminal is not sealing off the door, he thought while wiping sweat from his brow.

He then brought the stethoscope to his ears, crouched even lower down by the door, and pressed the end against the door.

"…"

He listened carefully and heard Shinjou's voice.

"Nn…"

It was a sigh.

Wondering what the situation was, Sayama switched on the recorder attached to the stethoscope.

"Oh… I need to hurry up and finish."

Finish what? thought Sayama.

"Nnah. I-it's too tight. I don't think I can get it in. Nn…"

Hearing that, Sayama wondered whether he should head in or not.

"Ah. That's better. Okay, now I need to clean up."

"Leave the evidence, Shinjou-kun!!"

He broke through the door in an instant.

The door fell to the floor and he saw a surprised Shinjou sitting on the closed toilet seat.

"Oh? Why are you all alone, Shinjou-kun? Did you fix everything

on your own!?”

“How about you try fixing your brain on your own!?” shouted Shinjou.

“Oh? That dress looks lovely, Shinjou-kun.”

“Eh?”

Her shoulders trembled while she shrank down and looked up from the toilet seat.

She was wearing a green dress that was made of light fabric and tightened around the waist. The short-sleeved jacket that appeared to go with the dress was large in order to make the waist look thinner.

終わりのクロニクル

However, she sat on the toilet seat with the skirt pulled up to her stomach. She used her spread left leg to balance herself while she grabbed at her right knee.

As the blank look on her face grew red, Sayama tilted his head.

“Hm? Shinjou-kun, why are you doing yoga with your panties on full display?”

“I-I’m not doing yoga. I, uh, couldn’t pull my stockings up very well. …Wait! Why did you suddenly open the door, Sayama-kun!?”

“You were in too much of a hurry and rolled up the top of the stocking, didn’t you? You do not want to tear a hole, so leave the rest to me.”

“Are you listening?”

“I am, but we must start by settling the first issue you brought up.”

“Eh?”

She tilted her head as he showed her the rubber gloves on his hands. He sat down on one knee, lifted her right leg, and placed the leg on his knee.

He noticed the top of the stocking had folded over and was rolling inwards.

He unrolled it and lifted the stocking while Shinjou raised her skirt and waited.

“Ah… Th-that tickles, so don’t worry about it.”

“I see. So I should continue without worrying about the tickling.”

“Ah! No, wait! I didn’t mean it like that!?”

“I did not mean it in a dirty way either, so- …You are very good at glaring at people, Shinjou-kun.”

Meanwhile, Sayama finished lifting the stocking.

He attached the top to the fastener hanging from the garter around her waist and Shinjou sighed. In order to put up with the tickling, she brought her hands to her chest while holding up her skirt.

“I was having trouble because my nails are too long,” she said while blushing. “So thanks.”

“Being able to help you change is all the thanks I need. This day must be recorded in Sayama history.”

“I have a feeling you have something to record every day.”

She stood up from the toilet seat and gathered the school uniform

and underwear that had been spread out below her butt.

She placed it all in her travel bag, pulled out and put on some new yellow shoes, and faced Sayama.

“Sorry. I was changing, but it was my fault for not telling you.”

“Were you trying to surprise me?”

“Yeah. It took longer than I thought because this was my first time putting on stockings. This kind of stylish stocking is different from the ones on our combat uniforms.”

Still blushing, she placed her hands on her shoulders and showed herself off to him.

“We’ll probably still be busy when I become Sadame, so I thought I would dress that way from the beginning. I didn’t choose anything too showy because I’ll be riding an airplane, though. …Does it look weird?”

“Of course not.”

“Really? It’s my first time wearing this outfit, so it’s a bit tight in places. Are you sure it’s fine?”

“Yes, I can tell you put a lot of effort into this. I usually see your bare legs, but this garter and stocking look is also quite- gfh. I-I was merely checking with my cheek! What kind of reaction is that!?”

“How can you say that after you pull up my skirt and rub your cheek against me?”

“Ha ha ha. You are contradicting yourself, Shinjou-kun. You yourself were lifting up your skirt just a moment ago.”

“Me lifting it and someone else lifting it are two different things. A-also, now that I’ve had time to think about it, not only did you barge into the stall, but what were you doing with that stethoscope and those weird machines!?”

Sayama shook his head.

…Good intentions are so rarely recognized these days.

“Listen. What I was doing is simple, Shinjou-kun. Listen carefully. Once I used a thermal sensor to see what you were doing inside the stall, I recorded the sound inside and-…”

She suddenly strangled him.

●

Well-maintained plants grew along a slope created by cutting down a portion of the forest and the afternoon sun washed over the

crops of that field.

The field widened toward the bottom of the slope and a large white building was located even further down.

This was behind Japanese UCAT which was disguised as a transportation building.

In addition to the crops, the field contained flower beds, trees, kadomatsu, and totem poles.

They had all been artificially planted and two people walked among them.

Both of the people wore black. One was a gray-haired man and the other was a maid in a white apron.

The maid held a closed parasol and followed a step behind the man.

“Itaru-sama, where are you going today?”

“Where do you want to go? Tell me, Sf.”

“Tes. I wish to go where you are.”

“Then tell me where I want to go. I’ll let you decide. You have ten seconds.”

“Tes. And if I cannot decide within ten seconds?”

“I will dismantle you and ship you back to Germany.”

“Tes.” Sf nodded. “Then I will leave my answer to you. Ten, nine, eight.”

“Wait. And if I don’t answer? Will you dismantle me as well out of joint responsibility?”

“No, this question was given to me, so if you do not answer, it will mean that is what you desire. Seven, six, five.”

“You idiot. I’m not going to answer.”

“Tes. Then that is what you desire. Four, three, two.”

“Wait. Answer me this first: what are you going to do if I do dismantle you and ship you back?”

“Tes. The questionnaires sent back to German UCAT will be used to develop a new-and-improved Second Sf, Third Sf, Sf Z, God Sf, etc., and I will be sent back to you. The new version will likely be able to help you with complete transformations for land, sea, and air. One, zer-…”

“It doesn’t matter, so let’s just stay here, you idiot.”

“Tes.” Sf stopped walking and bowed. “I have determined the fact that you care for me that much is a shocking truth.”

“I did it out of concern for my own safety.”

“Tes. Are you familiar with the phrase ‘they may compliment you, but they actually dislike you’?”

“You have that backwards! And why are you with me, anyway?”

“Tes. If something were to happen to you, I would lose my raison d’être.”

“Hah. It’s nice that dolls don’t lie. In other words, you’re doing it for yourself.”

“Tes. I am also glad to have been named your favorite. I will now make full use of German UCAT’s unique egocentric circuits.”

“Wait a second. If you have circuits like that, what happened to the equality circuits?”

“I am sorry, Itaru-sama, but those are not equality circuits. They have been named the communist circuits of the red heart.”

“So the Soviet Union’s your enemy!? That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it!?”

“They are known as Russia now, Itaru-sama. But even if the name has changed, the fact that they are our enemy has not.”

Itaru turned around and began walking, but after taking a few steps and turning back, he found Sf was not following. She was standing perfectly still.

“Why are you standing there, Sf?”

“Tes. You said. ‘It doesn’t matter, so let’s just stay here.’ ”

“Oh, did I? How wonderful. If I move a hundred meters away, you’ll lose track of me for the first time, won’t you?”

“Tes. I have determined this is a terribly troubling situation.”

“I see, I see. I’d like to know what a doll does when it’s troubled. Do you cry?”

Sf nodded.

“Losing track of you is outside my expectations, so I cannot predict what would happen.”

“Then how can you be certain it would trouble you?”

“Tes. Because I can predict that nothing else would trouble me.”

She opened the parasol and placed herself in the shade.

“I will wait here, so come take me with you once you finish your walk.”

“You don’t think I’ll just leave like this?”

“Tes. I do think you will,” she said. “But how about you hurry up

and leave? Do exactly what you want. Go on ahead."

"Do you think I'll go if you say that?"

"Tes. If that is what you wish." She bowed. "I will remain here as indicated by my name. Whatever my master wishes, I will remain here. No concern, courtesy, or recognition is needed. All I ask is that my master trusts in me and tells me what he desires."

And…

"Please look after your health. After this morning…"

"Don't tell anyone else I was coughing up blood, Sf. I'm not going to last long, so you need to hurry up and give up too."

"Tes. I have done so since the moment I was activated, so do not worry. I will not lose myself any earlier or later than you. I am your personal automaton, so I could do nothing else."

"Ridiculous." Itaru sighed into the sky and then glanced toward Sf. "How long are you going to stand there? Come bring some shade to your master."

"Tes."

Sf bowed and walked over to him.

She looked around the area as she did and she frowned for just an instant.

"According to the transmission we received, the new inspectors from American UCAT should arrive soon."

"I'm sure they will. And I'm sure it's going to cause trouble just like before."

The shade from Sf's parasol covered Itaru.

He looked around and began walking down the slope. Sf followed with the parasol and commented on his destination.

"I have determined that is the flower bed, Itaru-sama. Abram-sama's wife Arnavaz-sama and Development Department Director Tsukuyomi have planted various flowers there."

"Yes. We used to grow quite a lot of things here. This was originally a flower bed and parking lot, but the people from overseas were insistent on growing herbs or something and they eventually started growing a food supply. Afterwards, we all had a cookout together. I believe it was that hill over there where Diana actually got drunk for once and knocked my old man out with a mug."

"Is that what made Kazuo-sama go crazy?"

“No, he was still relatively normal back then. …The change came after we were never able to have that kind of ridiculous fun again.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just talking about the past, Sf. A past that you can find anywhere. Just like my destination can be found anywhere.”

He stopped walking and looked at the flower bed.

The yellow autumn chrysanthemums were in full bloom.

●

An apartment building bathed in the afternoon sun.

A large motorcycle with a sidecar attached sat atop the gravel laid out in front of the cement at the building’s first floor.

Behind that motorcycle, the steel door of the westernmost room slowly opened.

A dark-skinned boy stuck his head out and looked around.

He was Harakawa.

After making sure no one was around, he pulled his head back inside, closed the door, and locked it.

Inside the narrow entranceway, he sighed in his school uniform.

“It looks like the student council president and treasurer finally left.”

“Are you okay?” asked Heo from the living room.

The futon had been laid back out on the floor and she was lying in it with a wet towel on her forehead.

Seeing her looking up from the edge of the futon, Harakawa sighed again and walked into the living room.

“Whether I am or not, you need to worry about yourself, Heo Thunderson.”

“I’m feeling a lot better.”

“Is that so?”

He leaned against the column next to the closet and sat next to her.

She tilted her head.

“U-um, don’t you have to get to school?”

“In the time it took to get you in the futon, the time to earn my attendance passed.”

“Sorry.”

She pulled the futon up above her nose and he touched the empty

can he had pulled from the closet.

"I was wondering why you had quieted down in the closet, but I never would've guessed you'd gotten drunk and fallen asleep."

"But it was my first time drinking beer. A-and does that mean you drink while underage?"

"You just did too. You'll get used to it eventually. …Anyway, it must have been hot in there. I apologize for that. Of course, it was the alcohol that made you sweat more and dehydrated you a bit, but I guess that's my fault too. Did you finish the sports drink?"

"Oh, yes. It's over there."

He looked by her pillow and saw the empty 500 mL plastic bottle he had peeled the label from and used as a container. To drink the whole thing so quickly, her body had to have wanted water.

He stood up and picked up the bottle.

Heo said "um", but he ignored her and entered the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" she continued. "I could help."

"I don't need any help. And I'm not going to do anything bad, so just relax."

He still had a few packets of the powdered sports drink he used for hangovers, so he could easily handle a girl with a slight alcohol problem.

He washed out the plastic bottle, took a funnel from the sink, placed it in the bottle, and reopened the packet he had used half the powder from before. It was the blue Hawaii flavor of IAI's new BODILY FLUIDS 500 sports drink.

He poured in the blue powder, filled the bottle halfway with water, closed it, and shook it.

…This kind of powder dissolves in water a lot better than it used to.

On an elementary school field trip, the powder his mother had put in a bottle for him had hardened and refused to dissolve. He remembered how she had smiled bitterly when he had told her about it afterwards.

"But that doesn't happen anymore."

He looked across the empty kitchen and suddenly recalled the weight of the bottle in his hand.

He opened the lid, filled it the rest of the way with water, closed it again, and returned to the living room.

Heo frantically looked up when she heard his footsteps, but without saying a word, he placed the bottle by her pillow and sat by the closet column again.

“Um, can I really have this?”

“So you’re well enough to restrain yourself, are you? You drank the other one without saying a word.”

“S-sorry. I’ll take it.”

She sat up, grabbed the lid, and gathered her strength.

However…

“Um…”

She turned a troubled look his way and he realized why.

“Are you too weak to open it?”

“I think you tightened it too much.”

After he opened it and handed it back, she lowered her head and drank it. After two gulps, she took a breath. She then sighed, looked down toward the futon, and gave a weak smile.

“Thank you very much. After a short rest, I’ll leave.”

“Do you want to collapse again? You’re clearly not well and you’re not sweating. Get some sleep, Heo Thunderson. It was my fault this happened, so I’ll lend you my futon. If you don’t want to stay, you can leave, but otherwise, try thinking about this after you wake up again.”

He grabbed a paperback book from the floor.

“Um, about that book…” she said.

“This is the bizarre author Marume☆Sandayuu’s first novel since his shocking move to a different publisher. It’s called Love Limbs. It’s supposed to be a new serious love comedy, but it’s a little weird for the heroine to die in the table of contents.”

“N-no, that isn’t what I meant. Do you like books?”

“Does just reading them count as liking them?”

“It’s just that I found a bookshelf in the closet.”

“Heo. It’s bad manners for a guest to search through someone’s closet.”

“Sorry…”

She looked away and lowered her head. After dropping his gaze to the page, Harakawa looked back up a bit, but she still had her head lowered.

…What a troublesome girl.

He called her name and she looked at him in surprise.

He spoke while looking down at the book.

“You said you were supposed to meet your great-grandfather at 2 PM, right? Well, it’s already past 3.”

She shook her head and shrugged with a weak smile.

“I’m not feeling well and…I doubt he would be there if I went now.”

“Is that so? Well, at least you can look at your condition objectively now.”

“Harakawa?”

He looked up and found her tilting her head.

“Were you going to take me?”

“You can barely stand without staggering and you don’t know the roads around here. Do you really think you could make it on your own?”

“Thank you.”

“What are you talking about, Heo Thunderson? This is only what anyone would do.”

“What anyone would do?”

She narrowed her eyes in a small smile and let out a slow breath of relaxation.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for something like that, especially when I didn’t actually do it, Heo Thunderson. Only thank me when I actually do something and you like it. Got that? Don’t make me say it again. Don’t forget it.”

She gave a troubled smile and took a sip of the blue drink.

“Um, Harawaka? I’ve been wondering.”

“Yeah, I use that drink to help with hangovers. It’s good for you, but the smell kind of sticks in your nose, doesn’t it?”

“It tastes a bit like a bathroom air freshener.”

“You’ve eaten one?”

Harakawa’s mouth bent as he watched her frantically deny it.

He only realized that bend was a bitter smile when he looked back at the book and saw the term written there.

As he watched, Heo gently closed the plastic bottle, set it by her pillow, and went to sleep.

Chapter 8

“Confirmation of a Word”

To hear
And to speak
A single word
I hid and let spill so many feelings

●

A certain room overlooked the ocean.

The window gave a view of a vast bay underneath the late-afternoon sky.

The room itself was divided into two spaces of ten square meters each. The bedroom space by the window had a desk and a double bed while the living room space by the entrance had a tatami mat floor. The bath and the entrance to the shared bathroom were located next to the door.

“But it seems we can use the 24-hour underground hot spring, Shinjou-kun.”

The boy placing his travel bags next to the living room table spoke and received a reply.

“Wow, this bed is amazing. I bounced back up just from sitting on it. Look, look, Sayama-kun.”

Shinjou had placed her travel bag by the bed and was checking the bed’s springs.

“Ha ha. I feel kind of bad doing this while working on the Leviathan Road, but I never thought we would get to stay in a hotel like this. Not to mention that this is my first time travelling as far as Kyushu.”

“Did UCAT not have company trips?”

“You already know about the summer training camp, but they also had one at the end of the fiscal year. They would have an Izu dancer training camp or a snow tunnel escape training camp. I never went because I didn’t want anyone to know about my condition, though.”

“Based on the names, I think you were right not to go, Shinjou-kun.”

“You’re probably right.”

She smiled, got off the bed, approached the window, and picked up the guest tourist pamphlet placed on the bed’s pillow.

“I never thought my first trip would be to Nagasaki. I thought our senior trip would be my first.”

“I see. Perhaps I should have invited you somewhere before now. It never even crossed my mind.”

Sayama crossed his arms and nodded, so Shinjou frantically shook her head.

"It's fine, it's fine. You don't have to worry about that. I'm sure we'll have plenty of chances for trips in the future and there's still a lot we have to do. There's also the money. Also, I'm glad my first outing like this could be with you. No one would ever guess the two of us were on a trip toge-…"

Despite sounding so excited, she suddenly stopped and her expression froze.

"We left the dorm and school with our luggage, didn't we?"

"Yes, we left while greeting the students preparing for the athletic festival. What about it?"

"There's probably a good chance that rumors about us might be perhaps spreading through the school right now!!"

Hearing that, Sayama pulled a calculator from his pocket and pushed a few buttons.

"Probably, a good chance, might be, and perhaps. If I multiply them together as 90% each, that drops the total odds down to about 66%, Shinjou-kun."

"But unfortunately, that's still over 50%, Sayama-kun. And I've heard rumors that you're smart, but can I mentally deny them?"

"Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, any intellect measurable on the standard scale is no match for me."

He pulled up a rocking chair from the desk and sat in it. He looked to the same sea Shinjou was watching, looked down to the harbor and city, and finally looked to Shinjou herself.

"What do you think of the view? I think this was a nice room that happened to be vacant."

"I have a feeling you're hiding a complaint, but yes. This hotel is connected to IAI, isn't it? It's fun seeing everything from seven stories up and the wind is nice."

"Indeed. If there was a fire, there would be no saving us."

"Stop trying to make this more exciting than it is. …Anyway, it's nice how the airport is close by, we can reach the city easily, and we can see the ocean."

She looked past the bay and to the few islands visible on the boat-filled sea.

"This is nice. The Seto Inland Sea was good too, but this has a different feel to it."

"Well, most of the islands you can see here are just as empty as

the ones in the Inland Sea. But you can see the Goto Islands there and far beyond them but out of sight is China."

"4th-Gear's reservation is on one of the desert islands, isn't it?"

"I believe its island is not visible from here. We have to take a ship from Nagasaki Harbor to reach the IAI-owned island. I believe the IAI ship is set to leave first thing tomorrow morning."

"So we'll be going out to sea."

"The Seto Inland Sea was your first time on the beach, wasn't it? So will this be your first time out on the ocean?"

She nodded while looking out the window.

"Yes. Come to think of it, I've never seen the Pacific Ocean. Izumo-san swam in it last night, though."

Hearing that, Sayama replied in agreement toward her back.

…Although you call that being "swept away" not "swimming". But who cares about Izumo.

After he gave a nod of deep emotion, she took a step away from the window, sighed in satisfaction, and turned toward him.

"But we only got a chance to see this scenery because we got here so early."

"Let's wait a bit before heading out. A Nagasaki UCAT employee is supposed to bring us a communicator to contact the new headquarters in Okutama. It will apparently take some time to get here, though."

"I see. Well, I suppose work does come first."

She nodded and slowly walked toward him and his rocking chair.

She then sat down on his lap.

Her warmth, her softness, and the weight supporting them reached him through the double skirt.

"Let's talk."

●

When Sayama heard what Shinjou said, he nodded.

"Yes. There is a lot I want to say, but how about you go first, Shinjou-kun?"

"Sure." She gently rested her hair and back on his chest. "Um, thank you for last night. You put up with it even when I said something strange, made an impossible request, and then started crying."

“Did you?”

“I did. I know it’s impossible and that you lied when you said you could do it. It may be a little conceited, but I think it’s partially my fault that you had to tell that lie.”

“I see.”

Sayama recalled the conversation from the previous night.

How was Shinjou to have a child when she belonged to a race that switched between male and female at a set interval?

Everything might work fine while she was female, but what happened when she became male? She had also once said that she did not belong to any known race.

…That means she might be a unique product of crossbreeding between two races.

He could also think of several other possibilities such as human experimentation and the effect of some form of concept.

But no matter how much they looked into the cause, it would not change the fact that she belonged to a race that switched between sexes.

That was why she had spoken out about her worries and then cried.

“Am I…okay?”

“Of course you are. You are wonderful.”

“This might be a mean question, but…do you know something?”

“I do. I know that everything about you is wonderful. Am I wrong? That is the main tenet of Shinjou-ism.”

“Then let me teach you the main tenet of Sayama-ism: this isn’t a joke.”

Her shoulders shook a little and she smiled. In order to keep that trembling inside her, Sayama lightly embraced her from behind.

“Let us get right to the point. Do you think you can never have a child with me?”

“Eh? Um…u-uh, well… If we aren’t going to read too deeply into what that means, yes.”

“Good. Now let me rephrase my answer from last night: that is not a problem, so do not worry.”

She gasped and turned toward him. Her long hair twisted and her eyebrows were lowered.

“O-of course it’s a problem.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“B-but I still haven’t had my period and the boy side isn’t working either.”

“What if it simply takes longer for you? Or what if you still have issues with your body?”

To tell her to calm down, he gathered strength in the arms embracing her and gently moved the rocking chair.

“You dressed like this today, but was that because you think you still have issues with Setsu-kun’s body and want to remain as Sadame-kun as much as possible? But no matter how you dress yourself up, there are times when you are a boy, Shinjou-kun.”

“But…”

“I know what you want to say and this may be a step forward in a certain way.”

She looked up in confusion, but he returned her look with his usual expressionless face.

“Before, you hated your body itself and tried to stay as Sadame-kun for my sake. But now you prefer Sadame-kun because there is something you want to do. That is a major step forward. So listen. I will now resolve some of your unease.”

And he did so.

“3rd-Gear has technology for in vitro fertilization as well as cloning technology. You may not be able to carry the child yourself, but that technology will still allow you to have a child. That possibility is available to us now that 3rd-Gear has joined us.”

“…”

He heard Shinjou gulp and felt her hold her own body within his arms.

He then embraced her even more and continued rocking the chair.

“You are perfectly capable of rocking a cradle like this. We only need to take an egg cell from you, or – if that isn’t possible – modify one of your cells into an egg cell. So until we decide to do that, how about you try to do it on your own?”

“You mean…?”

“Do you still not understand?” Sayama shrugged. “The worry behind your tears has already been solved by the Leviathan Road. All that remains is to continue trying to see if you can do it without

relying on that technology.”

●

Sayama’s words filled the air and time passed.

Shinjou took several breaths on the slowly moving rocking chair and then opened her mouth to speak.

“U-um?”

She sounded hesitant and troubled.

“C-can I really trust in that and test myself?”

“You can. At any time, at any place, and in any way. Right?”

She nodded and formed a slightly crumpled smile.

“Yes, that’s right. I can continue testing myself at any time, at any place, and in any way.”

However, her head shot up and she frantically turned toward Sayama.

“D-did I just fall for a dangerous leading question!?”

“Oh? What ever are you talking about, Shinjou-kun?”

“Y-you asked me if I would test myself at any time, at any place, and in any way. Th-that’s leading me into accepting all sorts of kinky things!”

“You say some funny things, Shinjou-kun. Ha ha ha. It takes an amusing person to refer to an ethical truth of the universe as a leading question.”

“Stop lifting my skirt while you say that!”

He answered her shout of protest with a deep nod of understanding.

“Then I will do so silently.”

He bared Shinjou’s legs and gave a cry of admiration.

Shinjou frantically tried to twist out of his grasp, but…

“Wait, Sayama-kun. Stop making me straddle you.”

“Do not ask the impossible. Also, I believe it was you that did that.”

“That’s because my stockings slipped on my skirt and my feet aren’t reaching the ground.”

“I see. So your skirt is in the way. Such a naughty skirt. Allow me to take care of it.”

With a sigh of exasperation he sincerely lifted it up to her stomach.

“Now, that should make it easier to move your- gh. Wh-why are you elbowing me, Shinjou-kun?”

“It’s strange how I feel like I did something wrong when you ask so seriously.”

As Shinjou spoke, Sayama gently twisted her skirt into place and embraced her from behind once more. She trembled a bit and twisted her shoulders around to face him.

“Um, Sayama-kun? I-it’s not even five yet.”

“Listen carefully, Shinjou-kun. We have been too busy to do this sort of thing lately and I have a certain thought. Out of her dislike for Setsu-kun, Sadame-kun gave him her hairstyle and clothes, but in a way, could that be a form of Setsu-kun that Sadame-kun is more comfortable with?”

“…”

“When testing Setsu-kun, it was almost always in the school uniform, but that may have been a mistake as it emphasized that it was him. Perhaps it would be better to do it in an outfit that you are comfortable in no matter the situation. Also, this is not the dorm room in which you originally showed your resolve. In a way, it is a place of comfort because you will never return here, so try to relax.”

“But Setsu is…”

She began to speak but stopped.

Sayama thought on the continuation of that sentence.

…Does she still have a problem with Setsu-kun?

As he thought about what lay within her mind, he asked about it.

“Is there a problem with Setsu-kun? Is it about having a child or that he is a boy?”

It took her a fair amount of time to answer.

“…”

What is it? he wondered about her.

At the very least, he felt he had answered the questions concerning Setsu that she had mentioned.

…But what is it this time?

What he had to do was simple.

…I can do nothing but trust in her.

He grabbed her shoulders, squeezed, and then embraced her slender body once more.

She took in a breath before speaking.

“Wait. U-um?”

She took in a few more breaths and moved her lips to test the words she was about to say.

She gently held her own body within his arms. She grabbed her elbows, held her sides, held the bottoms of her shoulders, and shrank down.

“Do I…”

Her voice trembled.

“Do I really not have to worry? Will it really be okay?”

●

After taking a breath, Shinjou spoke again and her voice was quieter this time.

“What is this fear I feel about being Setsu? It’s there, I still feel some unease, and I want there to be more, but…” She shook her head. “Can I really believe at least a little bit that I don’t have to worry about that?”

Sayama felt her relax in his arms and heard her let out a breath.

He felt a trembling heat in the soft back he embraced.

She then nodded and the hair that held a trace of her body heat shook between his chest and her back. After nodding a few more times, she quietly but firmly spoke.

“Will we really be able to use 3rd-Gear’s technology?”

“If you are worried, you can ask the automatons about it. They will do everything they can to serve people.”

“Then… I can have a child even if it won’t be with my actual body? I can do that?”

And…

“I can rejoice about that?”

“You can, but that is only the bare minimum of joy. If you test yourself and it goes well, you can rejoice much, much more.”

“Ah…”

She let out a sigh as she curled up her back and sank into his chest.

As she entrusted herself to him, he rubbed his cheek against hers from behind.

She then lowered her cheek in a nod.

“Right.”

In response, he slowly lifted her skirt back up.

“Ah.”

He lifted it above her knees and then exposed everything from her gently spread legs to the bottom of her stomach. Before she could change her mind, he reached for her white underwear and gently lowered it down to her knees. With a shriek, she hid her cheeks behind her hands.

While making sure not to interfere with that movement, he lifted one of her knees and removed the underwear from that leg.

“Um, Sayama-kun?” she said with heat in her voice. “Th-this is embarrassing.”

“It is all over for someone if they forget their shame, Shinjou-kun.”

“I suppose someone who long since travelled that road would know.”

“Ha ha ha. Now, let us continue.”

“This is hardly new, but what you’re saying doesn’t follow from what I said. A-also…”

She looked forward through the gaps between her fingers.

“Aren’t you going to close the window?”

“What are you talking about, Shinjou-kun? You need to show off your newfound self to the world.”

“You can do that on your own. W-wait. Stop kicking the chair and move away from the window. It’s too soon for me to try exhibitioni-Ahh! This is way too close to the window!!”

“Calm down, Shinjou-kun. We are on the seventh floor. No one can see us from outside.”

“A-are you sure?”

“I am, Shinjou-kun. You would have to be flying through the sky to see us. …Oh, look. An airplane.”

“They can see from the airplane!!”

“Just calm down, Shinjou-kun. Please trust me.”

“R-really? That won’t be easy given your previous offenses.”

“I will admit I have been rude to you on occasion, but try to remember when we first met. My behavior towards Setsu-kun was immaculate.”

“I just remembered that immaculate record began with you

pressing your ear against my chest and then pulling on me while saying nonsense in the bath. The trauma's coming back!!"

Sayama continued regardless.

"Quiet down and stop trying to close various things, Shinjou-kun. I have no proof, but I have a feeling things will go well today. How about you?"

"W-well, I feel like it might work today, too. This isn't the same as the usual dorm room and my worries from before are gone."

Her tone lowered as she spoke and Sayama smiled at her.

"I see. If this will go well, then perhaps I should call the lobby and put in an advance order for sekihan."

"Y-you don't have to do that. I'd rather this be our secret."

Such lovely words, he thought while gently rocking the chair once more.

"Ah."

She spread her legs to balance herself and he raised his knees.

With his knees pressing up against her butt, she further spread her legs and he placed the backs of her knees over the arms of the chair. He brought her stockings to a position they could safely slip from and she brought her hands to her face.

"S-Sayama-kun?"

"What is it? I do not have time to deal with jokes right now."

"That's my line!! U-um? Will you please listen to me?"

She bent backwards to press her forehead against his neck and she took a breath.

"You always stop when I'm about to cry, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"You do." She blushed and lowered her gaze a bit. "But don't do that today. Sometimes, I wonder if it would go better if you showed less restraint because of me."

"I see. Then today is a day for both of us to face our problem areas."

She gave a small smile while still blushing.

"Ah," she said when he touched her hand. "U-um? Can I ask something else?"

"What is it?"

"Well," she said with her hands on her cheeks. "You're recording this, aren't you?"

●

Izumo and Kazami travelled east along a road that ran along the JR Itsukaichi Line that existed between Harakawa's apartment and Taka-Akita Academy.

To their right were a guardrail, a small embankment, and the railroad track. To their left was a field. The only other things around were the evening sun and the cool wind that carried some sand in it.

Izumo kept the motorcycle engine on, but he held the clutch and moved the vehicle forward by kicking off the ground. A sign by the field gave the speed limit, but he was moving the motorcycle well below that.

"Hey, Chisato."

He called behind him where Kazami sat on the motorcycle.

"Come to think of it, we ended up skipping school today."

She looked up into the sky and gave a short groan.

"Well, that may be true. We can try getting Ooki-sensei to work something out for us tomorrow."

"No, let's not do that. Cheating isn't gonna help."

He spoke lazily and she agreed with her eyebrows lowered in a smile.

He suddenly stopped moving and turned back toward her.

"Chisato, why did we stop keeping an eye on that Harakawa guy's place and start wandering around?"

"Hm? Oh, there was something bothering me. And I don't think I was wrong."

"Did something happen? Not that I see any reason to keep an eye on a figure-obsessed guy's apartment."

"Wait a second." Kazami leaned up against his back and tilted her head. "U-um, Kaku? Do you really think that stuff about Harakawa having a figure is true?"

"Yeah. You saw that women's underwear, didn't you? He's doing the same thing Old Man Ooshiro did for a while."

"But don't you find it odd that a boy on Ooshiro-san's level lives so nearby?"

"Chisato, UCAT has a lot of people on the same level as him. They just have different tastes."

Crap, that's actually a good point, she thought.

However…

"Oh, but that Harakawa isn't in UCAT."

"Sayama didn't used to be either. Strange people have the talent from the beginning. I know it can be hard for normal people like us to understand, though."

"Yes. Sometimes I have difficulty keeping up with them. Anyway, Kaku, you're making a decent argument, but I think it's a little different this time."

"You do? Then I guess it is."

"Why did you change your mind so quickly?"

"Because you don't lie," he answered with a serious expression.

"That's not true."

"Then maybe you deceive me out of concern for me and I don't realize it. But if so, that kind of lie isn't gonna harm me, so there's no problem. Anyway, you think there's something more to this Harakawa, don't you?"

She gave a mental nod to his calm question and shook her hair in the chilly wind that carried an earthy scent.

"What he's hiding is one of the reasons I said to leave his apartment."

"If it isn't a figure, what is it? Did he abduct someone?"

"Please don't say something I could hear Sayama saying. Although that might be it."

She stepped down from the motorcycle and spoke in the opposite direction.

"Basically, we have a guest. Isn't that right?"

A man in a gray suit stood behind them on the road lit by the evening sun.

He was tall and his face and hair pointed to a certain fact.

"A foreigner?"

"He was watching us from near the apartment. I thought he might need something, so I had him come here. It took some time before he showed himself, though."

The man bowed and formed a smile in the eyes behind his glasses.

"Thank you very much for taking this outside of the public eye. My name is Roger Sully."

Roger spoke in English and Kazami frowned.

“What did the foreigner say?” asked Izumo.

“He said, ‘I’m Roger Sully and make sure you remember it, idiot.’ ”

“I did not go that far.”

“Wait!” shouted Izumo. “So you can speak Japanese!?”

Roger narrowed his eyes further.

“I see, speaking in Japanese will work better. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the assistant inspector from American UCAT.”

Kazami frowned at that and partially removed her hips from the motorcycle seat.

“A pleasure to meet you too. I am honored that American UCAT’s inspector would go out of his way to greet us.”

“As assistant inspector, I felt I had to greet the two who wield Concept Core weapons.”

…I see.

Kazami’s frown became a smile.

She had referred to him simply as an “inspector”, but he had reiterated that he was the “assistant inspector”. That meant she had not misheard and he had not misspoken. He did indeed have a full inspector above him.

…And his refusal to abbreviate the title means his organization is strict about rank.

She had heard that American UCAT was primarily made up of people from the American military. If he was the same and he would not use the same term to refer to both his own rank and his superior’s rank…

…His superior must have the skill befitting the role of inspector.

He had likely used a spy satellite or American UCAT personnel to find the two of them.

Roger then asked a question.

“What are you two doing out here today?”

“Well, there’s a student who isn’t showing up to school and his homeroom teacher asked us to urge him to attend. However, he refused to come out, so we have to wait until tomorrow to try again.”

She was not lying and she interpreted his nod as evidence that they had not yet located Heo.

Realizing she had the advantage here, she relaxed a bit.

“But the Leviathan Road negotiator seemed to be with you,” pointed out Roger.

“Yes, the student in question is his classmate.”

As she spoke, she thought about whether she should tell the man what Sayama was doing and whether she should approach or avoid the information about Heo. Telling him about Sayama would likely satisfy him, but making Sayama’s actions sound too important could make him question the visit to Harakawa’s apartment.

She weighed the benefits and the dangers and spoke.

“But Sayama had to leave partway through for the Leviathan Road.”

“Is that so?” Roger bent back a bit and smiled. “Thank you for the wonderful piece of information. Yes, this means American UCAT must negotiate with Japanese UCAT as planned.”

“What kind of negotiation?”

“Nothing violent, I assure you. We will merely be carrying out the wishes of Mr. Richard Thunderson.”

“His wishes?”

“Yes. The reason he came to Japan. Surely you did not think he would be making the Leviathan Road run more smoothly, helping you escape the restraints of American UCAT, or introducing you to your negotiation partner, did you?”

They had thought all of those things.

This is bad, thought Kazami while no longer smiling. *Something dangerous is happening here.*

…What is this?

American UCAT was plotting something. As she wondered what, she lowered her hips into a defensive stance.

“Kaku.”

Before she could finish speaking his short name, Izumo had stopped the motorcycle and moved next to her.

Meanwhile, Roger brushed a hand through his hair and continued smiling.

“Now this is a problem,” he said.

“Is it? All I did was put up my guard. What happens now is up to you. Tell us what you’re after and why Richard Thunderson came to Japan.”

“I believe those are things I should tell the Leviathan Road

negotiator.”

“Then think of this as us getting the answer out of you with a more physical form of negotiation. Got it?”

“Is that so?” Roger lowered his head a little and wrinkled his brow despite still smiling. “Then you are a little too used to peace.”

Kazami frowned at that and the wind blew through.

“…”

In that vast flat area of land, the dry wind of approaching autumn carried the scents of evening and the field.

“Hey, Chisato. I can see your panties because the wind is blowing up your-…”

She threw an elbow, but Izumo did not collapse. While she wondered if she had gotten a poor angle, Roger removed his hand from his hair.

As she wondered what he would do, he snapped his fingers.

She then heard a metallic sound from her left. It was followed by the sound of something heavy falling on the asphalt.

She looked over and saw Izumo’s motorcycle lying in two pieces. The break was perfectly straight as if a giant blade had split it. Oil spilled from the unfamiliar and complex structure inside the engine and a large piston lost its momentum and stopped.

…What was that?

“You could say this was a bit of a concept,” said Roger with a smile. “Just to be clear, I have yet to finish introducing myself.”

Chapter 9

“Approach of Intention”

Here it comes
And here it is
The footsteps telling you to determine yourself have arrived

●

Kazami was up against a cutting power.

She repeatedly dodged the invisible power that sliced down from above.

She stood on a straight road lit by the evening sun and she was approximately seven meters from her opponent.

However…

“Not having a weapon really is a pain!”

If she called for G-Sp2 outside of a concept space, people would see it. She had Izumo on her side while Roger was alone.

…But without our weapons, we can’t get a decisive blow in on someone using a concept.

Due to the distortion in the air and the drifting sand, the cutting power Roger used looked like wind to her.

The attack always followed a snap of his right fingers and it was as fast as a sword strike. However, the slice undulated through the air like a whip and it could slice through both metal and asphalt.

She had nothing to use as a shield and no weapon to block with.

Izumo charged in from the left and Roger snapped his right fingers to attack, causing the wind to launch a counterattack against Izumo’s charge.

His charge was reckless, but Kazami sensed his intention. At the moment, Roger’s left side was open, so his actions were urging her to charge in.

And she did so.

She had to wait for the right timing, but she could not wait too long either. She worked best with quick bursts of strength, but Izumo did not. If she was too slow, he would be hit by the enemy attack rather than just drawing it his way.

…So…

She charged forward just as Roger held up his right fingers and began to twist them.

It began with the sound of her basketball shoes digging into the sand. When she gathered strength in her knees to accelerate, her shoes sank down to the bottom of that sand.

The returning force of the ground launched her body forward and she repeated the action to sprint onwards.

"…!"

She ran.

She had to travel about seven meters and she formed a hook-shaped trajectory to the right. That path kept her as far away from Roger's right side as possible while still taking the shortest path.

As she ran, Roger snapped his fingers toward Izumo.

She saw the fluctuation of wind fly directly toward Izumo ahead and to her left.

It was an attack from above.

She almost called his name, but he would not want her to waste her breath like that.

She instead silently asked him to dodge the attack and she saw him take a fairly forcible evasive action.

He intentionally tripped and fell to their left and Roger's right.

He threw himself onto the asphalt so he would stay out of her way and further split Roger's aim between the two of them.

"…!"

She continued running. To her right, she could see a road sign and a field that had grown corn during the summer. The field was divided from the road by a stone wall only about ten centimeters tall.

Roger was also there.

He was right in front of her now, so she straightened up in an instant. If her body was stretched out when she attacked, she could only cause light damage. To throw her full weight into the blow, she needed to straighten up and then crouch down again as she attacked.

While taking a quick breath, she rose up and clenched her left hand.

Her right foot kicked off the ground behind her and she charged in with her left shoulder in the lead.

By the time her left foot reached the ground, she had already rotated her left arm and waist clockwise. In order to launch her left fist from the elbow, she moved it forward and slightly upwards.

"Seyah!!"

But the strike did not reach because Roger had already jumped back.

…He's fast.

She was slightly surprised, but that was all.

…I suppose he is the assistant inspector of a nation's UCAT.

If she assumed he was on the same level as German Inspector Diana or 1st-Gear Inspector Brunhild, it was obvious she would not defeat him so easily.

She did not fight the forward motion of her left arm. As if letting the fist pull her, she rotated her shoulders and body clockwise which swung her body into a certain stance.

…Now I can continue with a roundhouse kick!

She did so.

She quickly raised her right leg and let it rotate. Meanwhile, Izumo spoke as he picked himself up off the asphalt.

"White!"

…You shut up.

終わりのクロニクル

She changed that thought into acceleration and targeted Roger's jaw with her swinging right heel.

However, the man dodged once more.

He bent back his falling body to just barely avoid her kick.

"Kh."

Before she could lower her rotating right leg, Roger took a step back while crouching down.

"The left hand!?"

She could not help but shout when she saw him raise that hand toward her.

Before she managed to ask if he could use his left hand too, he gave the answer by snapping his left fingers.

She saw the wind, but she could not avoid it because she had yet to fully lower her right leg.

"…!"

In that instant, she took her next action. She kicked to the right with the left leg supporting her in order to knock herself to the right.

The added tilt brought her right leg to the ground more quickly than expected. No, it actually landed on the stone wall dividing the field from the road.

She kicked off the wall with her right leg as if ricocheting off it and she leaped once more. She swung up her left knee, used that momentum to launch her body upwards, and gathered strength in her stomach to pull up her lower stomach and below while in midair.

"…"

She leaped over the wind Roger had fired at her.

However, he then snapped the fingers of his raised right hand.

He had been waiting for this attack and she could not do anything while jumping. She could only be hit.

However, she spotted a hope.

The hope located between her and Roger was the road sign next to the field.

She kicked off of the sign in mid-jump to avoid Roger's second attack.

"This ends here!!"

She brought her heel down on his head from above and he could no longer intercept her because he had already lowered both of his

hands.

However, he snapped his right fingers with the hand pointed downwards.

…What!?

The answer to her question was clear.

His right hand was pointed down and to her left.

In other words, towards Izumo.

“…!?”

She stopped in surprise and all sound vanished from her ears in an instant.

Her heel drop lost its edge and Roger managed to move out of the way, but she did not even care as she landed.

She quickly corrected her posture, turned around, and saw a certain color.

It was the red of blood.

“Kaku!?”

Izumo had to have been knocked away by the slicing attack because he was sitting with his back against the roadside guardrail. He held his left side where the color red covered an area with a width of about ten centimeters.

The red was visibly spreading along his shirt.

“Kaku!”

She ran over to him and heard a voice from behind.

“I suppose this settles it.”

She turned toward Roger’s voice but saw nothing there.

…Dammit.

She had a general thought about “the next time I see him”, but her imagination went no further.

The red before her eyes and the surrounding wind were everything to her now.

“Kaku.”

●

Kazami crouched down on one knee next to Izumo.

She was out of breath, but she decided that was due to the battle. She placed a hand on his shoulder and straightened his upper body by pushing it back against the guardrail.

“Hey, Chisato.”

“This is no time to act so casual!”

He smiled a little but gave none of the verbal abuse or excuses she was used to. That smile gave her a chill.

“Kaku, I’ll call for an ambulance, okay? Okay?”

“What’s this, Chisato? You look like you’re about to cry.”

She started to call him an idiot, but realized it was not the time and then had another thought.

…I can’t even say something so simple right now.

She finally realized just how far from calm she was.

A slight voice escaped her throat and her vision wavered.

She all of a sudden found she was trembling.

She could see a color spilled on the ground at her feet. The asphalt and sand were soaked with Izumo’s red.

…No.

She shook her head and tried to pull out her cell phone. She tried to stick a hand in her skirt pocket, but for some reason could not find it.

“Why?”

She looked down and realized why. Her hand was visibly shaking. It was so bad she could not get it into her pocket.

She shuddered.

“Kaku…”

Her voice was trembling. She wanted to do something, she knew she had to do something, and a thought she did not want to speak began spreading through her mind.

It was possible there was nothing she could do.

She finally managed to get her hand in the pocket.

“…!”

She pulled out the cell phone and pressed the button to reach the local fire station.

But she received no response, so she frowned and looked at the phone.

“It’s cut through.”

Her hand went weak and the black phone fell to the asphalt where it finally split in two.

“K-Kaku, I need your pho-…”

He did not have it. They had checked that when leaving the dorm.

…He said he didn’t need his because I had mine.

It had been during the morning that they had discussed that and how they might as well use the same wallet as well.

"…"

She prepared to say "no" despite it being meaningless, but she suddenly felt strength reach her. The power on her shoulders pulled her forward.

Before she could say anything, Izumo held her in his arms.

"Kaku."

She called out to him, but he said nothing. Instead…

"Nn…"

She followed his lead and brought her lips to his.

Feeling the gentle wetness, she thought while still trembling.

…He must be worried too.

"Kaku, u-um? Is there anything you…want to do?"

He slowly hugged her closer.

Before she could let out a gasp, he rested his weight on her as if collapsing forward.

What am I doing? This really isn't the time, she thought.

However…

…This is all I can do.

She embraced him and tried to ignore the muddy but warm wetness she felt in her right hand. He trembled in pain, but she selfishly felt it was fine as long as he did not pass out.

They kissed again and his hand touched her right breast.

She hesitated for a moment but accepted it.

If she did not accept it now because someone might see or because of what could happen later, she knew she would regret it.

But then she felt something was wrong.

"…?"

She exchanged tongues with Izumo and a large hand entered her unbuttoned blouse, but…

"…?"

Something was out of place. It was a cold sensation that did not fit the urgency of the situation.

…But…

The sensation was too strange. It was the sort of sensation that should never occur in such an urgent situation.

"Kaku."

She decided her next words would act as a dividing line.

“This will be the last time, so do as you please.”

He then embraced her in his right arm. His left hand tore open the lower buttons of her blouse and moved from her navel, around her left side, and to her back. There, it stroked between her shoulder blades.

She just about cried out, but she felt the odd sensation reach its peak and spoke before it could settle into the specifics.

“This isn’t right!!” she shouted.

●

Kazami suddenly shoved Izumo away, but the difference in weight sent her backwards and rolling along the asphalt.

He lay on the asphalt looking at her with the ends of his eyebrows lowered.

“Chisato.”

“This isn’t right.”

She held her own body as it trembled, but this tremor was not due to Izumo’s injury.

“Everything I’m seeing and feeling here is strange.”

“What do you-…”

“Quiet! You aren’t Kaku!”

She gathered her strength as she shouted, exhaled, inhaled, and looked around.

As she viewed the landscape, she heard Izumo’s voice.

“I really am me, y’know?”

“No, you aren’t,” she replied after spotting something.

“Why? Why would you say I’m not me?”

“This, for example.”

She pointed at something in front of her.

“That’s your motorcycle that was destroyed earlier. It was cut in two. But you know what? I don’t know anything about the internal structure of motorcycles.”

She stood up with her back to him and picked up the piston from the motorcycle’s engine.

“Look at this part. I sometimes see it in motor oil ads.” She looked at the unharmed piston. “The engine was split in half, so why wasn’t it cut? Are you going to tell me this unharmed component fell

out because it wasn't attached to anything?"

She turned toward Izumo and he looked back at her with a relaxed smile.

"Am I really not me, Chisato?"

"I'm sorry, but I simply can't believe that you are."

"I'd like to hear a little more evidence than that."

"Fine. With your right hand, you always touch my left breast first. When I do it on my own, I start with my right, though. …But just now, you started with the right. And you know what else?"

She gave a bitter smile.

"I still haven't told you my back is my biggest weak point. It's kind of creepy when you do everything exactly the way I'd want it," she said. "Thank you, my ideal Kaku, but you're simply too boring, just like this world. So…"

She raised her right fist and threw it into her own face.

She felt dizzy and gasped.

A moment later, the world seemed to sway before her eyes. Just like when Sayama's Baku showed her the past, everything went black and she felt like she was falling.

"…"

Izumo's smile wavered and vanished from her vision as she woke up.

●

"…!"

Kazami came to.

…Where am I?

She was on a road. It was the same road between the large field and the railroad. She sat on the back of the parked motorcycle and Izumo's back was right in front of her.

…This is the same as when we met Roger.

The only difference was Roger's absence.

"The sun is setting."

It seemed a fair bit of time had passed.

Oh, no, she thought just as she heard a sound from her cell phone.

She hesitantly pulled it from her pocket and found it was not cut in two. She breathed a sigh of relief and brought it to her ear.

"Hello? This is Kazami."

“Ah, Chisato-sama! Are you okay!?”

“Oh, Sibyl. Yeah, I guess we’re okay. Did something happen?”

“…”

“Sibyl?”

The usual response of “testament” did not arrive.

Kazami tilted her head at the silence she got instead, but then a shout reached her ear.

“What do you mean, ‘did something happen’!!?”

…Oh, dear.

“L-listen, Chisato-sama. A powerful philosopher’s stone reading was detected by your cell phone about an hour ago!”

Oh, yeah. I forget this did that, she thought but did not say.

Sibyl took a breath before continuing.

“I thought something might have happened and tried to contact you, but I wasn’t able to get through! I have been calling you every minute like a stalker, but you haven’t been responding at all! So I… I…I was so panicked I started hacking into a Russian missile silo!”

She really is panicking, thought Kazami.

But then she remembered herself just a bit earlier.

…I guess I’m not one to talk.

“Anyway, Sibyl, try to calm down.”

“Chisato-samaaa!”

She heard crying and assumed all of Sibyl’s emotions had switched over to relief.

Kazami gave a pleasant bitter smile and looked around.

…But what was the powerful philosopher’s stone reading?

The field and the railroad track were the only things around and Roger had arrived afterwards.

“There’s nothing like a philosopher’s stone here.”

She then noticed the trail the motorcycle tires had left in the sand down below. The sand was not dirt or dust from the field and it was slightly bluish-white.

…That’s made from philosopher’s stone powder, isn’t it?”

“Sibyl, I’ve figured it out. It looks like we really were attacked. Is the American inspector there!?”

“No, but he should be arriving from Yokota soon.”

“Be on your guard!”

“What do you…?”

Sibyl trailed off but quickly replied.

"Testament. Then listen carefully, Chisato-sama. It would probably be best if you did not come to join us right away. You would not make it in time for the inspector's arrival anyway." Strength had reentered her voice. "Come by once the situation has settled and we are both at a stalemate. If something does happen, I will send an email containing information on UCAT's back entrances. See you then."

"Right," said Kazami before ending the call and sighing.

…This isn't good.

Something was about to happen and they did not have their weapons.

"Hey, Kaku. What should we do?"

She was relieved that he was not actually injured, but he did not answer her question.

"…?"

When she frowned and looked over his shoulder, she found him staring into empty space with a serious expression while silently kneading and stroking the air. And the movements of his hands followed the curves of her body.

Naturally, she hit him.

"Gwah! Ah…eh? Wait? Huh?"

He turned around, saw her, spread his arms with a look of relief, and grabbed her breasts from below.

"Good, this really is the land of Chisato's tits."

"Stop groping me like you don't have a care in the world!"

The damage of the second hit caused him to sway like a pendulum.

"Ah! Wh-what was I just doing?"

"Looked to me like you were kneading my breasts in a dream."

"O-oh, yeah. Now that you mention it, I was. Yeah, I definitely was."

He nodded, looked at her, and then frowned as if he had suddenly realized something.

"Oh, c'mon." He looked like he was about to cry. "What are you doing dressed? So it really was a dream. What a disappointment."

"I get the feeling our dreams were completely different."

She lowered her shoulders in exasperation, but she was also

relieved that it had only been a dream.

…Thank goodness.

But Izumo's expression suddenly grew serious.

"Hey, Chisato."

"Eh?"

He tilted his head and spoke more slowly.

"What's this, Chisato? You look like you're about to cry."

"Eh?"

She repeated her questioning voice, but she began to tremble.

…Huh?

What is this? she wondered as she felt something fall down her cheek.

"Huh?"

She held out her hand and could see it shaking. A drop fell to the palm. More and more fell and refused to stop, so she frantically wiped at her eyes.

She was crying.

…Why?

"What is it, Chisato? Did you have a bad dream?"

"Yeah… How did you know?"

He fully turned around, wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and embraced her even tighter than in the dream.

He did not hold back. The strength somewhat took her breath away, but she gave herself into the embrace.

She gave a sobbing breath before speaking.

"It was a terrible dream."

"What kind of dream was it?"

"You…You were dying."

"I see, I see. That must've been scary. But I'm not gonna die and I'm with you, so don't worry."

He gently patted her back and she nodded while attempting to suppress her trembling.

"It was scary. And…"

She was unable to continue because he brought his lips to hers.

She took a breath and pressed toward him even more strongly than in the dream.

There was something she had to silently apologize for. Even if it had been a fake…

…I betrayed him a little.

He suddenly touched her breast. The fact that it was her left breast made her smile bitterly and relax.

"We can't do this here," she said after removing her lips. "And we can't do it now. Sibyl and the others might be in trouble."

"I see. Did you manage to calm down?"

She thought his comment did not really follow from hers, but she still nodded. She wrapped her arms around his neck again, rested her chin on his shoulder, and took a deep breath.

"I learned something today. Even I have something I'm afraid of."

In her dream, someone other than her had been hurt.

…What would happen to me if something like that actually happened?

That's a scary thought, she said in her heart.

"I have something I'm afraid of too," said Izumo.

"Really? Is it the same as mine?"

"Yeah," he said while lightly embracing her. "I'm afraid of wasting this perfect mood we've got going here. What do you say to that?"

"I say this!!"

She bent backwards and then slammed her knee into him.

●

Japanese UCAT's new underground headquarters was a large but enclosed space. It was about three stories tall and one of its walls contained a large screen.

Desks were gathered on the first floor portion and dolls were currently gathered in the center of those desks.

Sibyl wore her white armored uniform while surrounded by people in black maid uniforms and other white armored uniforms. She looked across the people waiting for her to speak.

"American UCAT's inspector still has not arrived?"

"Yes, sir. We have received no word from the lobby."

"Testament. Abram and the rest of the field operations group are on standby behind the lobby just in case. The German UCAT and 1st-Gear inspectors have not noticed any of this, correct?"

"Yes, sir. German UCAT's inspector was offered the 'extra soupy' course at the fourth basement beauty salon Transient Beauty. 1st-Gear's inspector is supposedly preparing a stand for the athletic

festival at her school."

"Testament," replied Sibyl. "Then please prepare to help the people inside the building evacuate or find shelter."

Someone then stepped forward. It was a red-haired maid.

"Sibyl-sama, what exactly should we do to prepare for that?"

"Testament. #8, the corridors between posts are separated using a concept space, so do your best to combine them all."

Sibyl then reached into her pocket and pulled out a remote control for the large screen.

She used it to produce a black screen where T- and L-shaped blocks began to drop down from the top.

"The blocks falling from the top are abstract representations of the corridors. The locations that do not link together well will arrive in order, so do your best to line them up without any gaps. If they are combined well enough to form a full line, they will vanish, but switch out with someone else if they pile up to the top of the screen. Also, if you eliminate four or more lines at once, they will be pushed over to the next person's screen, so try to use that if you can."

"I see," said #8 with a nod.

As the red-haired maid stepped back into the group, Sibyl spoke to them all.

"It is possible the American inspector will not do anything, so be careful not to cause a commotion. In case we must evacuate, please clear the corridors of trash. The corridors are especially bad right now because they are filled with piles of toys and books people have grown tired of after buying them in the summer. Throw them all out."

"Yes, sir. We sometimes see UCAT Director Ooshiro sleeping in the corridors. What should we do about that?"

"Testament. In that case, be quiet so you do not wake him as you throw him out. He counts as burnable trash."

"I'm right here!!"

That sudden shout was followed by an arm in a lab coat rising among them all. They all took a step back and Ooshiro walked through the gap to reach Sibyl.

"Sibyl-kun," he said with a hand on his chin. "What is the meaning of this dangerous planning meeting?"

"We were merely talking about throwing out the unneeded

trash."

"I was not talking about me. I was referring to the American inspector."

The 3rd automatons began whispering among themselves when they heard that.

" 'I was not talking about me'? So he's aware that he qualifies as trash?"

"That's why he protested. He knows no shame."

"Wh-why would you say that kind of thing aloud instead of with your shared memory!?"

"Please calm down, Ooshiro-sama. Conversation helps their work progress more smoothly."

"You're just trying to justify these personal attacks against me!!"

Sibyl held out her remote control with a smile and he took it.

"What is this, Sibyl-kun?"

"Testament. Do you understand what your job is now?"

"Of course. To run away."

"Testament. I assumed a coward would say that. However, you are the leader of Japanese UCAT and are thus needed to handle the arrival of America's inspector, so please wait here."

"I'd love to, but my legs will carry me away on their own."

"Testament. I assumed you would say that. Please press the External Input 3 button."

He did so and an image appeared on the large screen. It was a game screen with a black background, a line of buildings of four different colors at the bottom, and white lines representing missiles falling down from above.

"Oh, I see."

Ooshiro used the jog wheel to align the cursor on a missile and shot it down.

"Testament. Well done, Ooshiro-sama. More and more are falling, so please keep it up."

"Um, Sibyl-kun? What exactly is this?"

"Testament. It is directly linked to a nuclear missile silo belonging to a certain country. If you get game over, a real missile will be fired back at you, so please do your best."

"Are you pinning me here!?" shouted Ooshiro.

A maid facing the communicator frantically turned around.

“Everyone! We have an intruder! The intruder is currently on the runway and moving this way!”

“Testament, how quickly?”

“Yes, sir.” The maid checked the console. “Slowly. I have determined it to be walking pace. They have also given an identification signal!”

She took a breath.

“It’s American UCAT!”

Everyone straightened up upon hearing that.

Sibyl’s voice tore through the silence and she raised a hand.

“Everyone, please get to work!”

Many voices responded and the maids all turned their backs and scattered.

Sibyl brushed a hand through her hair and joined the flow of people leaving the headquarters.

However, something stopped her: Ooshiro. He spoke up while using the jog wheel.

“Sibyl-kun! Can I ask one thing!? There’s a reward screen if I clear the stage, right!?”

Sibyl nodded with a smile, pulled a new remote control from her pocket, opened the large screen’s option menu, and changed the game’s difficulty to “hardest”.

She ignored the shouting old man and gave a shout of her own.

“Enter Type 3 Defense! Everyone, hurry to your posts!!”

Chapter 10

“One who Commands Great Power”

What is that?
Can it be seen?
Is it correct?

●

The scarlet light of the evening sun created a shadow between the mountains and a group of white buildings filled that shadow.

It was IAI's Okutama branch.

Behind the white buildings was a long and wide asphalt line continuing back into the valley.

It was a runway.

Currently, the runway contained motion. That motion came from shadows. The evening sun in the period halfway between summer and autumn created several long shadows on the runway.

The shadows came from moving people.

First, a single person moved from east to west along the three kilometer runway.

A group of people surrounding the first person at a distance moved in the same direction, but they suddenly vanished.

They had been crushed.

That action had been accompanied by three sounds.

First, the footsteps and snapping fingers of the elderly man in a suit who was moving west on his own.

Second, a multitude of sounds as something struck the surrounding people and the sounds of them falling to the asphalt.

And third, a roar from the eastern sky that acted as the background music for it all.

The elderly man walked on while surrounded by all those sounds.

"Now, now. What is this? American UCAT's inspector has arrived, so aren't you going to give him a proper reception? And yet you insist on using the concepts of all the Gears."

As he walked, the men surrounding him tightened in. They wore white and black armored uniforms and they blocked his path from the front to the sides at a distance of five meters.

"Wait! Why is American UCAT's inspector harming us!?"

"Harming? I'm not harming you. This is a greeting. Sixty years ago when the different UCATs visited the National Defense Department, they would do this to us if we didn't prove our strength to them. …Japanese UCAT is in this state because you have no strength, so let me give a new greeting."

He raised his right arm and spoke the Japanese he had learned

before leaving the United States.

"Konnichiwa, konnichiwa."

He snapped his fingers and around a dozen men were simultaneously slammed to the asphalt.

"Domo arigato and sayonara."

The weapons that hit the ground were anti-concept combat gear, but they broke and the people were mercilessly crushed against the hard ground in their armored uniforms.

Nothing that fell even bounced. They seemed to be slammed and then pressed down.

"This…yes, this will end it. When I, Odor, snap my fingers, a single odor will crush you all. Can an organization like this really hold back the other UCATs, begin the Leviathan Road on its own, and stand at the center of the world?"

He raised his right arm toward the unit located diagonally to the right from him.

He snapped his right fingers and crushed them.

Once he turned his right hand toward the unit to the left, the members of that unit lowered their hips and aimed their rifles at him.

"Move any further and we'll shoot!"

Nevertheless, Odor swung his hand a second time which caused them to pull the triggers.

The gunshots were accompanied by a metallic sound between them.

An instant later, two things happened.

Several sharp bullets were knocked to the asphalt in front of Odor and those who had pulled the triggers also crashed into the asphalt.

Odor continued on while ignoring their groans. There were still plenty of people surrounding him up ahead, so he raised his right hand toward those people visible in the distance.

He snapped his fingers and a metallic sound burst into the air.

"…!?"

He saw a giant form standing between him and the others.

The man of over two meters wore a white combat coat and had a white turban wrapped around his head. His wrinkled skin had the dark color of Middle Easterners and the hands of the same color pointed a giant white spear toward the sky.

“I am Abram Mesam, Director of Japanese UCAT’s field operations department. What do you want?”

“Would you look at that, would you look at that. One of those known as the Eight Great Dragon Kings has come to greet me. I am American UCAT Inspector Odor and I want two things,” said Odor. “They are simple, simple things. End the Leviathan Road and transfer all authority thereof to the other UCATs. In other words, my country and a few others have decided it is too dangerous to leave the fate of the world in the hands of a few Japanese children.”

“Testament. And do you intend to get your way through force?”

Someone else lined up alongside Abram. It was a girl with long, blonde hair and a white armored uniform.

Odor raised his right arm, but left it above his head.

“Who? Who are you?”

“Testament. I am Sibyl of Japanese UCAT.”

Sibyl then spread her arms.

At the same time, something jumped from beyond the five-story transportation control building behind her.

Odor snapped his fingers.

“…!”

But his power was deflected by twin giant swords.

The jumping form landed behind Sibyl and produced a heavy metallic rumble as it did. The shaking proved how heavy it was.

“This is Lady Rhea’s god of war from 3rd-Gear. We have unintentionally recreated the situation from sixty years ago, so what will you do? At the time, the UCATs were true military forces and the National Defense Department was outnumbered.”

“Funny. Now this is funny.

“What is funny?” asked Sibyl.

“What? What was that you just said?” Odor gave a bitter smile. “It shows just how conceited you have grown, Japanese UCAT. Yes, sixty years ago, the Allied UCATs arrived with a military force and were unable to harm the National Defense Department they outnumbered. But…”

He repeated the word “but” while lowering his head.

He pressed his left hand against his forehead, and brought the same hand below his neck as if resisting something.

After a few seconds, he let out a laugh.

“Sixty years ago… Yes, it was sixty years ago. The United States forgave a certain island nation. They had picked a fight with us, but we generously forgave them because of how small yet courageous they were and we helped them develop their civilization afterwards. What if I told you the same applied to the National Defense Department?”

He raised his head and showed off his clenched teeth with a smile.

“A wonderful story. A truly wonderful story. And a wonderful greeting. A truly wonderful greeting. It is because we did not crush you sixty years ago and because you have forgotten that we forgave you back then that you now believe you possess great strength and believe you are equal to others.”

He snapped his right fingers toward the sunset sky.

A single metallic sound filled that sky and it was followed by the roar that had been present there for a while.

“What is this?”

As Sibyl frowned, Odor stuck both hands in his pockets.

“It’s over. My greeting is over.”

Everyone heard a voice respond to those words.

- **—Objects fall down.**

And the world changed.

As everyone wondered what had happened, something happened in front of them.

A few of the items belonging to their comrades on the asphalt floated up a little. It looked as if they were drifting in the water at the beach.

“This is 5th-Gear’s flying concept, isn’t it?” asked Abram. “Bullets and other objects with no designated ‘bottom surface’ are not affected by gravity and anything that can change its sense of ‘down’ can fly freely.”

“Yes. During the last century… About halfway through the last century, my country obtained it. Just watch.”

Odor’s words were followed by a change in the sky. Something suddenly appeared to the east in the sunset sky.

They had presumably already been flying there while using a concept to hide their form. They had merely shown themselves after

entering the concept space that had just been created.

The objects flying toward the gathered people appeared to have avian forms at first glance. Twelve of them were visible in the distance, but they quickly approached.

They produced a great roar and shook the forest as they arrived at extreme low altitude over it.

“Dragons!?”

The physical answer to that question reached the people gathered on the runway.

They were mechanical dragons. They were about thirty meters long and clad in blue.

They all resembled fighters at first glance, but a change occurred as they loudly passed by overhead.

“!?”

Their framework extended, their wings folded up, and their four limbs extended to take a dragon’s form.

These were fully transforming mechanical dragons.

“Look. Just look, Japanese UCAT. We will let you see this and we will not hide it. After the Concept War, American UCAT developed these to combat the remnants of the different Gears. These are the Blanca 9 fully transforming mechanical dragons.”

The twelve mechanical dragons instantly ascended, completed their transformation into dragons, and turned around in midair. They twisted their bodies like cats to fly back the amount they had overshot the runway and then chose to drop straight down.

With no concern for their mechanical bodies, they dropped from the sky and to the hard ground.

They landed with a noise befitting their great bestial forms and they landed only a few meters behind Odor.

The sunset scenery was filled with the heavy sounds of twelve sets of four legs and a tail tearing into the runway.

But that was not all. Several new objects appeared in the sky behind them.

They were transport planes.

Also, several dark green four-ton trucks slowly drove up the road beyond the runway.

The air shook from the roar in the sky, the sounds of engines on the ground, and the sounds of the massive machines breathing on

the runway.

Standing in front of them all, Odor observed what lay in front of him.

He saw Abram with spear at the ready, Sibyl with her god of war preparing its swords, and the other Japanese UCAT members re-aiming their firearms.

Behind them were a white building, the mountains, the evening sky, and the scarlet sun.

While facing them all, he spoke.

“Listen. Listen, all of you. American UCAT is speaking. Many unforeseen problems have surfaced in the Leviathan Road and it is focused too exclusively within Japanese UCAT. The actions of the ones known as the Army are also a problem and you cannot deny that there are many concerns about a possible danger in carrying out the Leviathan Road.”

He took a breath.

“As such. As such, we now demand that the Leviathan Road be temporarily halted, that Japanese UCAT abandons any actions taken solely at its own discretion, that the Leviathan Road be placed under the authority of every UCAT, and that all decisions be made by a committee made up of representatives from each country.”

“Testament. Odor-sama, you are asking that we abandon the Leviathan Road, aren’t you? And you will bring it fully under American UCAT control in the name of using a committee.”

“That is a poor way of putting it. Very poor. We are not putting the United States in the lead. It is just that American UCAT possesses the greatest strength of any UCAT. We do not need to be in the lead for we stand in the center of justice. Japanese UCAT’s mistaken understanding of the ‘individual’ has merely caused you to lose sight of the ‘whole’ of the world.”

“But does American UCAT have the right to stop the Leviathan Road!? It is an inviolable negotiation agreed to by Sayama Kaoru!”

“We do,” declared Odor. His words of violating the inviolable brought silence to the others. “We do. And as long as we do, Team Leviathan cannot continue with the Leviathan Road. There is a reason why we have that right and it was given to us by Mr. Richard Thunderson’s death.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sibyl.

“We have no obligation to tell you. Not someone of your level. Our previous justification is enough for you. After all, any enemy of ours is evil. I hear Japanese UCAT once contained villains. If you still possess any of those cowards who could not advance without excusing themselves as villains, we will not fear to call ourselves just and teach them the truth in order to crush them. I ask you, are you evil!?”

“We are not, but let me tell you one thing.”

Abram held his spear tight and narrowed his one eye as he watched the transport planes landing on the distant eastern end of the runway.

“A villain still exists within Japanese UCAT.”

“I see,” replied Odor. He nodded and smiled. “Good. Very good, everyone. Then let the world continue once more.”

●

A long, hardwood hallway had a 12 square meter Japanese-style entrance on one end, but it had a darkness unreached by the ceiling light on the other end.

The walls were plaster and several sliding doors were located on either side. A few of the closer sliding doors were opened and several people were moving between them.

Most of those people were large men, slender middle-aged men, or women with thin smiles, but they all had a single point in common: they carried plates of food.

A woman sat and watched them from the entrance.

She wore a red kimono and glasses and she had a black telephone on her lap.

“Oh, I see. So you and Setsu-chan won’t be visiting today? Yes, I’ll eat your portions, so don’t worry. Not a problem. I won’t gain any weight.”

Ryouko showed off her teeth in a smile.

“So you’re on a trip with Setsu-chan. This is a big moment for you, young master. So where is he? Yes, I’d like to talk with him a bit. I can tell him what positions are best with a guy like him. Eh? He’s in the bath right now?”

Ryouko’s expression grew serious and she held the receiver in both hands.

“Young master! This is your chance! Your grandfather taught you how to open a locked door, didn’t he? Yes, yes. The method you trained for by opening the door to the city gym’s girl’s locker room and then running away. If I recall, you escaped the police car by kicking your grandfather into its path so it hit him and-… Eh? You’re past that level?”

She heard footsteps. She did not turn toward them, but she heard the voice.

“Sister, can you help the others carry in dinner?”

“Hm? But I just finished lighting incense at the shrine in the backyard.”

“That is a standard duty as master of the house. And our profession means we must take extra care with that sort of thing.”

“Eh? But, Kouji, you’re the futuristic type that was wondering if we should get robot guards the other day.”

“No, that’s not quite accurate. The IAI ‘Dog Willpower’ that I ordered have protective charms for household safety and prosperous business placed inside. You know how superstitious IAI can be, don’t you?”

“Young master, young master. Listen. Kouji’s all obsessed with machines now. Could this get any worse? As his sister, I’m really worried about his future. …I know, right? Real people are the best. …See, Kouji? Getting real people for guards is best.”

Kouji sighed and looked down at his sister.

“If you keep making excuses to get out of work, I’m going to tell our parents. They’re on a tour that simulates being stranded in the Mount Fuji Sea of Trees, but they’ll be back with their souvenirs tomorrow.”

“Eh? But they only told me to look after the shrine out back. … Eh? Oh, yes. I’ll tell you once you’re married, young master. My father told you the same thing about the Tamiya family shrine, right?”

Ryouko laughed into the receiver.

“Yes, yes. The best women have lots of secrets. You really know how it works. …Oh, yes. Something just arrived at your room? A communicator? …Oh, okay. I won’t ask if it’s part of your job, but do your best. Setsu-chan’s with you, right? No, that’s fine. So what is it?”

She narrowed her eyes as she listened to the phone and she slowly turned to Kouji.

"Kouji, the young master says we should cook some sekihan next time he visits with Setsu-chan."

"And who exactly is going to do that? No, I suppose my first question should be who it's for."

Ryouko frowned at that, removed her right hand from the receiver, and raised a finger toward him.

"C'mon, Kouji. It's sekihan, so it's gotta be for Setsu-chan."

"It can't possibly be for him! He's a boy!"

"The body doesn't matter. You've seen a lot of people like that, haven't you!?"

"I have, but the people here had to go through a certain process to get to that point! Setsu-kun may be more than 80% there in how he feels, but you should normally stop someone from doing that! Don't you all agree!?"

His question was answered by several nodding heads visible through the sliding doors on the left and right of the hallway.

They all spoke in unison.

"It can't be helped with us, but it probably isn't the best idea for a current child."

"Idiots!"

Ryouko reflexively stood up and gave a fierce glare toward Kouji and the rest.

"How can you be so stupid!? How can you be so moronic!? How can you be so…um, to supplement for myself, I'm so happy!"

"Thankfully, I have no idea what you mean, sister."

"I'll ignore that, but you can't give up just because 'it can't be helped'!" She stuck out her tongue. "It can be helped. No matter what people may do, they can be happy as long as they do what feels good to them, they don't die, and they don't cause problems for others. That's why I support Setsu-chan and I'd be happy if all of you would do the same!"

"That was certainly amazing if you actually think that was a good argument. …You back there, you don't have to cry and nod in agreement!"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes. If that single dissenting opinion from my brother is the only one, the Tamiya family democracy declares that

the Tamiya family will fully support Setsu-chan."

"Um, sister."

Kouji's shoulders drooped.

"Listen. Have you forgotten that Setsu-kun has a sister?" He took in a breath. "And it's the sister that the young master is interested in. Setsu-kun said as much. I'll check the listening device recording later to make sure!"

Her brother's attack from an unexpected angle put Ryouko on her guard and she embraced the phone as if to protect it.

"B-but…"

"What is it, sister?"

"H-have you ever seen Setsu-chan's supposed sister?"

"I have. She greeted me when I picked the young master up at IAI."

"That was a fake!!" she declared while adjusting her grip on the phone. "It was Setsu-chan in disguise! Yay! You were tricked by Setsu-chan! And I would've seen through it because of his scent."

"Stop insisting the impossible. And it was clearly a girl."

"Are you saying you checked by grabbing and pulling the penis like the young master did!?"

"If I'd done that, I'd have been taken to the police or a hospital! And don't shout that kind of thing so loudly! The neighbors can hear you!"

"Don't change the subject, Kouji. Listen carefully. You didn't strip off her clothes? You didn't hold her down so she couldn't move? And you didn't visually or tactilely check? Then you can't know anything! As someone in the security guard business, you should be ashamed by your behavior!" she said. "Also, the young master might not be getting along with Setsu-chan's sister! For example, he might have barged into the locker room, suddenly stripped off most of her clothes, and started touching her. Or he might have pushed her to the bed and forced her to spread her legs. If he did that, she might have started hating him, right? And if you think about it logically, whose turn is it then!? Tah, dah! Se! Tsu! Chan! See? I used staccato to emphasize it!"

With that said, she sighed and gave an exasperated pose with the phone still in her right hand.

"You sometimes have real trouble thinking logically, Kouji. Life

might seem easier if you believe everything you see, but it worries me when you live in delusion like that."

"I'm sorry, sister. It will cut the conversation off rather suddenly, but can I collapse right here and now?"

"Sure, go ahead. But the floor is too hard to get any good rest on, so go buy some sekihan beans instead."

Kouji ignored her.

He sat on the floor with his back to his sister and slowly threw himself forward.

Seeing that her brother was no longer moving, Ryouko nodded with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

"Such a troublesome boy."

She gave another nod of understanding and sat with her back leaning against the wall.

"Sorry, young master. Yes, the evil was slain. Kouji sometimes says the most nonsensical things. Oh, right. Sorry for getting so worked up on this end when you went out of your way to inform us you wouldn't be coming to dinner. Make sure the two of you do your best with your work. Oh, and another thing."

She fixed her bangs that had gotten out of place in the argument with her brother.

"There's a half-Japanese boy in your class, right? Yes, the one who seems like a silent hitman who helped clean and carry things on the last day of preparations for the All Holiday Festival. …Yes, yes. Harakawa-kun. Earlier today, he was at the supermarket with a girl. They seemed to be buying food for dinner."

She turned toward the front door and the wood lattice entrance that could not be seen from inside.

"Yes, she was a younger girl with short blonde hair. …Yes, I listened with a parabolic microphone and her name is Heo. How about I try using that to extort something from him? Yes, I have everything I need. …Eh? I can't? But it's a good piece of information?"

A broad smile covered her face.

"Well, of course it is. Nothing I say is wrong or bad. Anyway, make sure you work hard. I'm sure it won't be easy."

●

The sun was setting over the mountain ridge.

Its light washed over a long stretch of asphalt with a great many figures moving on it.

Some were people, some were dragons made of metal, and one was a large, artificial human form.

Gunfire, footsteps, sword strikes, voices, and metallic sounds filled the air. The wind also swept in another roar as it landed on the runway.

It came from transport planes.

Their back hatches opened and released flat Hummer-type vehicles and several American UCAT soldiers. They all wore blue armored uniforms and ran along the runway at superhuman speeds. The mechanisms installed within their armored uniforms accelerated their movements.

They included women and people of different skin color, they were joined by the group that had arrived by truck, and the blue wave rushed down the runway.

As if pulling them forward, the blue mechanical dragons roared and ran forward. Their steel legs smashed the asphalt, but their movements were almost light as they led the way.

Meanwhile, the white group formed a wall for them to crash into.

The blue wave and the white wall both got what they wanted.

The blue wave was stopped by the wall and the white wall was broken as it tried to suppress the wave.

Some of them formed a large whitecap as they clashed within the surging wave.

One of those was Sibyl and her white god of war as she faced a mechanical dragon.

"…"

She knew she had to stop it. If she did not buy time here, many different things within Japanese UCAT's headquarters would be captured: materiel, personnel, data, and the remnants of feelings.

Most of those had to be evacuated. The materiel and personnel would be guided underground while the data would be locked down in the server by the information division.

The key to it all was the fifth basement. Everything below was a top secret zone. The Concept Core equipment and Sibyl's god of war were stored on that fifth basement.

The other UCATs had not been told what lay below that floor.

Ooshiro had given permission to evacuate there, but everyone and everything still had to get there.

“So I need to buy some time.”

She clashed with a single mechanical dragon. The blue dragon was taller than her white god of war and she had heard its name was Blanca 9.

“I once heard from Mr. Richard Thunderson that the craft meant to be officially adopted by American UCAT was named Blanca.”

The blue mechanical dragon lowered down like a cat and fired shells from the secondary cannons on its shoulders.

“…!”

Sibyl held her hands forward to deflect the shells with her blades.

She deflected them into the sky because there were people down below.

More shells arrived, so she continued swinging the swords to deflect them.

The dragon moved forward as it fired.

The repeated sounds of shellfire tore into the space between the two machines and the dragon stepped forward each time.

However, Sibyl also moved forward.

She did not need any strength to step into the great sound and pressure. She held her arms apart and moved her fingers through the air as if playing an instrument. The white god of war responded with detailed movements of its swords with the sounds of deflected shells forming the notes.

Metal and sparks resounded.

Among the movement lit by the twilight sky, the white god of war made music from the dragon’s attacks and moved forward.

They closed in on each other.

Suddenly, light appeared to Sibyl’s right.

Another mechanical dragon had fired its main cannon, the dragon cannon in its mouth. The bluish-white beam of light was at least several meters across and it swept toward her across the runway with a splashing sound.

The clear sound of the blue light raced across the runway.

The light’s destruction sent several people in white armored uniforms flying through the air and it tore into the ground.

It threatened to swallow up Sibyl and the god of war.

"…!"

It hit and she heard a sound, but the sound was wrong.

It was not the sound of spraying light. Instead…

"Fire!?"

The sound everyone identified was accompanied by the appropriate phenomenon.

The bluish-white dragon cannon had been burned away.

Red flames instantly burned it down to the base as if it were a scrap of paper or a cloth soaked in oil.

The dragon was pierced through by the flames that reached it.

They first entered through the cracks in the cowling covering its mechanical body and then they burst out its back and into the sky behind it. After that, the sound of scorching flames enveloped the blue dragon.

"———!"

The supposedly formless flames roared like a crimson dragon.

And then the supposedly metal dragon burned to ashes without melting.

"That was the Cowling Lance B-Sp which uses 9th-Gear's Concept Core, wasn't it?" said Sibyl. "An appropriate power for 9th which worshiped fire."

She turned from the silenced enemy and to the large man holding a white spear to her right.

"Testament. Thank you very much, Director Abram."

"Testament. I should be the one thanking you for helping with a field operations job."

He lowered the spear and it, B-Sp, had transformed. It had originally had an extremely thick tip, but that tip was now split into a double-bladed spear.

"I must be getting old," he said. "I no longer feel the desire to show off."

"Testament. Even so, it is an honor. I never had a chance to fight alongside you sixty years ago."

"Do you…know about me?"

"Testament. I was unable to meet you because I was asleep, but when I saw you and Arnavaz-sama two years ago, I used my knowledge of the people I had met back then and the history

afterwards to put most of it together."

"I see," said Abram while looking expressionlessly in front of Sibyl.

The blue mechanical dragon was preparing to fight once more.

"Shall I handle this?"

"No, Abram-sama. You worry about the others."

The dragon aimed both its secondary cannons and opened its mouth for its dragon cannon, but Sibyl smiled.

Abram gave a bitter smile in return.

"Does a maintenance worker smile at all times so the others can relax?"

"Testament. Did you not call it an automaton trait because you felt this was kinder? Also, it appears to me that Arnavaz-sama always waits for you with a smile."

"I don't exactly approve of bringing up household issues on the battlefield."

With that said, he leaped over the many blue and white figures, flipped around, and ran toward a different mechanical dragon. Sibyl faced forward after watching him leave.

She saw light in the mechanical dragon's mouth.

However…

"Here I come."

She launched herself forward, swung up her arms, and attacked.

Chapter 11

“Complicated Power”

It becomes such a jumbled mess because it is all gathered together
As fragments, it would simply scatter

●

The development department on UCAT HQ's second basement was filled with confusion.

The fact that it was on one of the higher basements was a problem.

"Keep in mind that this is the most important place! Carry down the PCs and all the other physical equipment!"

A woman in a lab coat commanded the others while tapping a meter stick on the wall. The nametag on her chest said Tsukuyomi Shizuru.

She stood in the white corridor in front of the development department. It led to the storerooms and the armory and the walls had opened to reveal the transport rails.

"If we use the armory transport elevators, we can send all the equipment to the fifth basement."

She glanced over at the elevator console on the wall. It controlled all four large elevators in the armory and the BF5 light was on for the first time she had ever seen.

"But I'm amazed the higher ups removed the limiter on that top secret area."

A man carrying a bundle of designs walked up and she turned toward him.

"Kashima, throw those on the next pallet. We're using it for paper."

"No, these have a divine protection of metal on them, so they'll be fine with the swords. We don't want them burning, after all. More importantly, what will we be doing now?"

"Have you seen the map of the fifth basement?"

"I have. It covered the basement itself and the ventilation space that acts like an attic."

"And if we hack into the communication line from that attic, we can get through even if they jam us."

"Yes," agreed Kashima. "I'll be able to call Natsu-san and tell her I can't make it home today."

"…"

"And I'm sure she'll bravely tell me an extra wonderful dinner will be waiting for me the next day! Ahh, I want to let those damn

Americans here what they're doing!"

"I see you keep going even when people fall silent now."

"What are you talking about? This is valuable evidence of my happiness. I'm sure your husband used to say this kind of thing while writhing around. The two of you must have been so happy."

Tsukuyomi recalled the past. Miyako had been young and her husband had still been with her. She then imagined that husband holding a family photo at work while crawling on the floor or wriggling around in the corridor.

"That's just creepy."

"I see. Let me take this chance to tell you something important: there is something wrong with you."

"There's something wrong with you in the opposite direction, so go check in a mirror. And can't you carry some more things out while you talk? Like Atsuta's stuff?"

"His computer probably has nothing but weird songs on it. American UCAT would probably think it's the mantra of some weird cult, so do you think we could distract them with it?"

Meanwhile, another figure walked down the corridor.

It was an automaton. The black-haired automaton wore a white work apron and bowed once she noticed Tsukuyomi.

"Yes, sir. This floor will soon be purged and hidden. Anyone who has completed their preparations should take the elevator down. The third and fourth basements are already in the queue, so please hurry."

Her instructions were followed by a small sound.

The sound of tearing paper came from the top and bottom of the walls forming the development department room.

Immediately afterwards, a shaking filled the corridor.

The empty room was removed from the corridor. It and the production rooms connected to it moved away like a ship being rowed out to sea or a car trembling as it began to drive.

Tsukuyomi looked in the gap, but she sensed nothing there.

There was no light or darkness. She could tell nothing beyond that there was nothing there. The development room drifted out on that unknowable ocean as if the unknowable gap were spreading.

The automaton let out a breath much like a sigh.

"After being purged, the areas with primary concept expansion

floors will have the normal floor fixed in place and the concept expansion floor hidden. That means the development room will no longer exist in this world."

"I see. So you hide the floor on such a fundamental level that no information can be restored from residual thoughts or records."

"Yes, sir. Even if they attempt to restore the floor, the automaton in charge of the purge would be needed to accurately reconnect the severed parent string vibration. All that will remain are the harmless areas such as the cafeteria, the library, and the training rooms as well as the new headquarters as bait."

"The new headquarters? Is everyone still managing the purge from there?"

"Yes, sir. But the development room was the last major area to be purged, so their work is finished and they will be rewriting everything to normal floors. Please hurry down. Otherwise you will be trapped on a purged floor that may or may not ever be recovered."

The last of the equipment was being loaded on a pallet situated on the transport rails in the corridor wall. The members of the development department were competing to see just how much of their personal items they could fit on the tatami mat sized pallet.

…This is a war.

She turned to the development room with a bitter smile and noticed a new wall had appeared there. That was how the corridor was meant to look. The concept space development department had been overwritten with the real version. The wall was somewhat transparent and she could see their room drifting away on the other side.

"Director Tsukuyomi!"

Kashima called for her from down the corridor. The transport pallet had been sent off at low speed and he turned back among the group following it.

"Please hurry!"

"I'll be right there!"

She began jogging and brought a hand to her hips hoping they would be fine, but then she turned around. The automaton remained in front of the vanishing development room.

Just as she was going to tell the automaton to follow, the

automaton bowed.

“I will be waiting for you to retrieve this space.”

She leaped into the room that was drifting away. She jumped over the unknowable gap that had grown to a few meters and she landed in the entrance of that empty room.

“You…”

“Yes, sir. I have determined there is no need to worry, Director Tsukuyomi. To retrieve the purged floor falling into the enclosed space, the automaton who severed the parent string vibration must reconnect it, but the process will be more stable if there is a voice calling from the purged floor.”

As she spoke, she turned toward Tsukuyomi from the open door of the room.

“A few of the automatons – including me – have difficulty fighting. We specialize in housework, cleaning, or otherwise preserving a room, so I have determined this is the perfect job for us.”

“…”

“A doll is meant to be stored in a box, but they are also meant to be taken out once more by human hands. Also, I have heard that the Coppélia recreation rate rises if people wish for it. Of course, it was not until later that I learned what Coppélia meant, but that is why we will be waiting for those human hands. That is what I have determined in order to further affirm my decision.”

Tsukuyomi listened to her and briefly lowered her gaze.

“…”

When she looked up once more, there was strength in her eyes and a smile on the corners of her mouth. She decided to emulate the phrase the automaton had been repeating.

“So should I say ‘yes, sir’?”

“And should I reply with ‘Testament’?”

A distortion filled the automaton’s voice and her body seemed to grow fuzzy.

She was falling into the unknowable space and yet she still bowed.

Tsukuyomi could not hear her parting words and she grew too blurry to see.

“!?”

The next thing Tsukuyomi knew, nothing but a wall lay before her.

“Hurry up, Director Tsukuyomi! Did you hurt your back again!?”

Tsukuyomi pulled a pen from her pocket and threw it at Kashima who was poking his head out from the armory entrance.

●

On the surface, the battle on the runway was beginning to move in a certain direction.

The mechanical dragons facing Abram and Sibyl had fallen back a bit to draw their two enemies away from Japanese UCAT’s main force.

Something then charged into the slight gap that created.

“Another transport plane!?”

A dark green four-engine transport plane slipped onto the runway and formed a barrier. The Japanese UCAT members watched as Humvees and soldiers in blue armored uniforms left the back hatch.

“Outta the way, damn you! I wanted to see Sibyl-san fight, so why do I have to see these filthy men!?”

The men in white armored uniforms were sent flying by the bullets that answered their anger.

Their spatial barriers formed from defense concepts weakened the bullets somewhat, but…

“We’ll die if they hit the joints! Especially the back of the neck! Everyone, make sure to tighten your collar!”

Everyone obeyed the voice of their commander and moved forward. The ones holding meter-tall shields moved to the front and the ones with submachine guns followed while crouched down.

“Damn,” muttered a young soldier.

The sounds of gunfire, the distant voices of the mechanical dragons, and the unending roar from the transport plane’s engines filled the background.

“Are we really not allowed to use real bullets!?”

He held a shield and his commander covered him from behind and answered his question.

“This is not a clear battle against ‘hostile forces’ like 1st or 3rd were. We’re supposed to be settling things with the people holding onto a past grudge, but this is another UCAT.”

“Then is this what’s going on!? Once things settle down here and everyone cools their heads, they’ll meet on the political front and

tell the Americans we were only having a mock battle while they used real bullets!? They'll say America was at fault and so they need to back off? Are we just pawns in that plan!?"

A middle-aged man firing a sniper rifle next to the complaining man was blown backwards.

"!?"

He looked over and saw a bullet had made its way into the joint of the armor on the right shoulder.

As the man tried to get up, the younger soldier tried to stop him.

"Stay still! You need medical help!"

"I can handle that on my own. More importantly, hand over your gun. If you're going to complain instead of shoot, I'll shoot with my left arm."

He got up, seemed to ignore his unmoving right arm, and used his left hand to open the first aid pack at his waist.

The younger man tried to help, but he stopped him.

"You're only talking about the political side. It's true we're nothing but pawns on that front, but there's something we can accomplish here. Look behind you."

The younger man looked back and saw Japanese UCAT headquarters disguised as a transport control building.

"Not a single member of American UCAT has made it in there. That's the present issue. If we let even one person through, it means we weren't able to complete our job. But if we hold this runway until the evacuation is complete, we can turn to those on the political front and tell them it's their turn to do their job."

He pressed an emergency pouch on his right shoulder and held out his left hand without even wiping off the blood.

"Give me your ammo and then fall back. If I can protect your retreat, I'll have accomplished something only I could do."

A bullet shot past to the side and produced a metallic sound from the commander's shield. The younger solider listened to it with his back to the older man.

"…"

He silently closed his eyes and passed his submachine gun to the middle-aged man.

"I see."

The man nodded and used his chin to point toward the disguised

transport control building.

"Now, go."

However, his expression quickly changed to a frown.

"Hey."

He spoke up because of what the younger man had done.

After handing over his submachine gun, he had shrugged, crouched down, and picked up the rifle the other man had dropped. After picking up the bolt-action sniper rifle, he sighed.

"You can't aim right now, so just spray bullets around with that. I'll use this since you can't."

"Take good care of it. My gun has the name of a goddess carved into it."

"Mine has a 2nd name on it too."

The young soldier lowered his hips, pressed the stock against his shoulder, and aimed.

However, he heard a metallic sound before he could fire.

It was thrown down from the sky as if falling and it was loud.

"…!"

The commander standing before him was slammed to the asphalt.

"What was that?" gulped someone in the back and a certain figure appeared.

A slender old man in a gray suit stood about ten meters away and his blue eyes were turned their way.

"There. I just have to get through there and we'll have a path to the building behind you."

His words were followed by the young soldier, the middle-aged soldier, and all the soldiers behind them simultaneously pulling the triggers. The mock bullets with "mock" written on the front flew toward their enemy while receiving the concept protection of 1st-Gear.

However, a snap of his fingers stopped it all.

A splendid metallic noise filled the air between the two sides and a straight line was gouged into the ground.

The bullets were all slammed to the ground and the elderly man's right hand shot up once more.

"It's no use. It's no use, Japanese UCAT. Your false evil cannot stop justice."

His words were followed by the young soldier with the rifle

forcefully rising to his feet.

"False evil and justice are meaningless on the battlefield!"

He stood up and pulled the trigger just as the elderly man snapped his fingers.

And he did so twice.

The same metallic noise filled the air twice.

The first crushed the flying bullets and the second came from directly over the young soldier's head.

"…!"

A form flew through the air.

It looked both black and white as it leaped while backed by the sky that was filling with purple darkness.

The form used their left arm to block the metallic noise that had appeared over the young soldier's head.

"!"

The left arm fell from the shoulder and crashed to the ground, but the flying figure was otherwise unaffected. They rotated around once, their skirt filled with air, and they landed on the ground.

The figure was wearing black and white clothes. They were Japanese UCAT's combat maid uniform and combat apron. Above those two garments was short red hair.

"Welcome to Japanese UCAT, American UCAT Inspector Odor-sama. I am #8 and I am acting as the automaton representative of Japanese UCAT."

She bowed and turned toward the young soldier and the others behind him.

"The evacuation is complete. Please continue after them. We will cover for you."

With that, her expression changed to a smile. Her eyes bent shallowly and her red hair blew in the wind.

"As you have completed your mission, we would like to receive you as guests."

That was followed by more motion.

Maids burst from the entrance to the headquarters while holding heavy machineguns, shields, and various blades. They formed a final line of defense in front of the building.

"We betrayed 3rd-Gear, defected to Low-Gear, and rested beneath Kanda, so we were unable to take part in the Leviathan

Road with 3rd-Gear. This is only the equipment the development department was unable to transport down, but we will use it against American UCAT."

As #8 spoke, her arm rose up from the ground.

It drifted a bit, but it soon flew toward her left shoulder and reconnected with a sound of scraping metal.

Meanwhile, small objects spilled from below her skirt and apron: screws, springs, small metal panels, and plastic panels.

She used precise gravitational control to combine them.

"They are nothing but simple handguns, but there are thirty-two of them."

They all floated around her as she faced Odor. With the final crimson light of the setting sun in the sky behind her, bullets loaded into all thirty-two of her weapons. With the sound reverberating around her, the red-haired automaton opened her mouth, lowered her waist, and curtsied.

"Now, then. Let the service begin."

With that, she ran forward.

●

#8 ran.

Her gravitational control and limb output were set to "hard" and she moved her body as she wished.

This gave her a running speed of a few dozen kilometers per hour and a jumping distance of almost ten meters.

…Although the excessive heat production reduces the time I can remain active.

She was a reception model, not a combat one.

Her combat knowledge came from the shared memories of the automatons that had remained on 3rd-Gear's side. It specifically came from their memories fighting Team Leviathan.

At the time, the automatons on the battlefield had set their movement ability at only a bit above that of a human. That had not pushed their heat production too high and thus allowed them to continue fighting.

But the situation was different now. The opponent was different, the goal was different, and the time available was different.

…And I can use everyone's experiences for a greater result.

She leaped in order to draw American UCAT's attention, to jump over them, and to get closer to Odor who was luring her deeper into their battlefield.

She landed on the asphalt and immediately began running. The enemies that had visually followed her began approaching and firing on her.

But she did not mind. This movement pattern had been included in the memories of the thirty-odd automatons she had copied over.

While running, she spread her fingers and swung her hand toward the small approaching unit.

Gunfire rang out as flames burst from the thirty-two barrels behind her that were each tracking a different enemy.

The black handguns moved like bees as they freely flew through the air, charged into the enemy ranks, and began firing from every angle including from above.

Rather than targeting the joints of their mechanized armored uniforms, the flying guns targeted the protruding points. Handguns had poor penetrating ability, so she gave the bullets the power of a broad surface. This was even more an issue with flat-tipped mock bullets.

No matter what kind of armor someone wore, if their raised fingertip was accurately fired on, the impact would knock back their hand. A hit to the jaw would act as an uppercut and a direct hit to the edge of the armor's exterior would have the same effect as a powerful shove to that spot.

However, most such places were at the ends of body parts that moved around the most and a direct hit required high-speed decision-making and accurate firing.

#8's abilities as a machine achieved that.

The small unit she charged into was struck all over by pinpoint impacts.

One tripped after a shot delivered a horizontal strike to the acceleration actuator on his lower leg, one was knocked into the air by a shot fired into the chin of his helmet guard from below, another was sent into a spin by repeated shots from the right into his backpack and was tripped by a shot from the left to the kneecap of the leg he was spinning on, and yet another accidentally fired on his fellow soldiers after a shot struck the barrel of his machinegun from

the side.

It was all done with the weakest firearms known as handguns, with the weakest bullets known as mock bullets, and by the weakest creation known as a reception automaton.

All that remained was the reverberation of gunfire, the handguns flying through the darkening sky as if they had wings, and #8 who ran ahead of them.

Her eyes were on Odor who took a step back and she ran toward him.

The sky above was changing from purple to dark blue and it was primarily filled with metallic sounds, mechanical dragon footsteps, and the roaring of transport plane engines.

That was proof that the Japanese UCAT members were retreating.

However, there was still something requiring her attention.

…That man.

American UCAT's inspector had the ability to crush an opponent from above when he snapped his fingers.

A simple observation suggested it was a strike from a gravity concept, but she did not fully understand its identity and traits. When leaping in to protect the others, she had received the attack with her left arm, but some aspects of it were still uncertain.

If she did not clarify its details, putting together a countermeasure in the future would prove difficult.

She could tell it was a gravity attack rather than a simple impact because its targets did not bounce.

Also, the power flew from his fingertips to the sky where it could be said to "hit" and it was launched diagonally down from there. If another object got in the way, it would strike the obstruction instead.

It was a fast and surefire attack. Japanese UCAT possessed defensive concepts, but this attack crushed the concept along with its target. Its maximum range seemed to be approximately three hundred meters and there was no sign of a limitation on how many times it could be used.

…I have determined that power is unmatched for middle or close range.

However, Odor would quickly use the power to defend against a

sniper shot or any other long-range attack.

…Does he have a concept for attacking and for sensing?

#8 spread her arms and lowered down as she approached Odor.

They were approximately three meters apart.

A blue mechanical dragon was located about one hundred meters behind him and its pointed snout knocked something into the air.

It was a white god of war.

The god of war's arms and torso were broken, but Sibyl was nowhere near it.

Five pillars of smoke rose into the sky beyond the barrier formed by a transport plane and #8 determined those were ones that had been shot down by Sibyl and Abram.

Abram was not visible on the runway either and #8 understood that this was her battlefield.

"The guests have already been brought inside, so the only remaining job is cleaning the front walk they used."

She was only twenty meters from Odor now.

She brought her right shoulder forward and held out her right hand as if to perform a jab.

At the same time, the black handguns in the air moved as if flapping their nonexistent wings.

In place of a flapping sound, the sound of loading bullets rang out and the guns flew forward in four groups of eight.

They approached within five meters of Odor.

One group flew in a horizontal circle, one flew in a circle tilted a little to the west, one flew in a circle tilted a little to the east, and the last revolved in a greatly tilted circle that surrounded all the others.

A model of heavenly bodies was formed from metal guns.

They all rotated while altering their speed in an attempt to throw off Odor's interception as much as possible.

#8 jumped further while focusing on the movements of the guns.

She performed a spin as she ran, her skirt flipped up toward the night sky, and metal parts launched from it and into that sky.

Gravitational control managed by the movements of her left hand constructed a new firearm that landed in that hand.

"This is the sniper rifle 'Little Steely'. It is meant for use against small tanks, but there is no need to worry as it is loaded with mock

bullets.”

She ran and heard a laugh as she further approached.

It was Odor’s voice and he raised his right arm.

“Amusing! You are most amusing, automaton! Did you think my defenses could not react to a high-speed round from a sniper rifle at point blank range if you were holding me down with rapid handgun fire!?”

She continued on without answering.

終わりの

Amid the wind her running produced, she swung her right hand to permit the handguns to fire.

She primarily targeted Odor's extremities with extra focus on his right hand. He would have difficulty defending against attacks from behind, so she also targeted the base of his right shoulder blade and other parts of the human body needed to swing the right arm.

She chose timing that would allow him to intercept one shot. That could allow her to analyze his power.

However…

…If I defeat him here, that will no longer be a danger.

As she thought, she moved her fingers to fire.

"!"

Thirty-two distinct gunshots rang out.

She was less than ten meters away and she took the final step.

She then saw the blue mechanical dragon one hundred meters behind the elderly man turn its head toward her.

Its mouth was pointed slightly down to face her, it was opened, and there was light inside.

This was its dragon cannon.

…It can't be.

She attempted to predict what would happen, but this situation did not exist in her copied memories.

"You're having the dragon cannon fired on you!?"

That question became reality.

A bluish-white beam of light wide enough to envelop a small house tore across the runway.

A scorching sound filled the air and it moved directly toward Odor.

Just before it reached him, he snapped his fingers. This was the strike #8 had allowed him with her timing.

However, his right hand was pointed behind him rather than at her.

"Ah," she said without meaning too.

She had predicted his intention.

The power produced by the snap of his fingers had a range of approximately three hundred meters. At only a hundred meters behind him, the mechanical dragon was within range.

A metallic sound erupted from below its mouth as it produced the

dragon cannon.

The roar of his power crushed the dragon cannon, but only the lower half of the beam.

"…!?"

In front of the dragon, its attack of light with actual mass was slammed into the ground and spread across the asphalt. Its heat burnt the asphalt, but as if it had bounced off, it did not tear into the asphalt. It simply spread out as it was held down.

However, #8's high level visual devices saw a strange fact about Odor's attack.

…It didn't tear into the dragon cannon!?

It had torn into the space that the dragon cannon was passing through.

…He attacked the space from above?

She wondered why because it had to be easier to attack the light rather than the space. It also should have been easier to form a wall with the power that would have stopped the lower half of the beam.

#8 realized that Odor's attack had a certain characteristic beyond a mere gravity attack.

If she took advantage of it, she had a chance of defeating him.

But even as she thought that, she saw the mechanical dragon instantly stop firing its dragon cannon.

The bottom half had been cleanly torn away and the remaining half-cylinder was flying down toward her. It had been fired at a slight downward angle and Odor slipped through the gap created by the missing lower half.

However, the remaining top half was going to hit her.

And that was precisely what happened.

"!"

She did not feel the damage of the direct hit. In the instant her body was destroyed, all of her sense devices were overloaded and disconnected.

She saw her left arm vanish beyond the elbow, her torso was broken from the lower left chest to the right side, and she felt the inner parts of her back touching the air all the way up to her neck.

…I have determined my face has received considerable damage as well.

She determined she wanted to be repaired, but that brought a

question. That was not necessary at the moment, so why had she made that decision?

However, she reached another conclusion as well: she wanted to avoid falling to the ground.

…Why?

Her memories brought the answer to that question.

It was based on her past experience of a loss.

The boy who had defeated her had not held her down or knocked her to the ground. He had lifted her up onto his shoulder.

…Oh.

Once she remembered that, she accepted her decision.

…A doll naturally wants to be held by someone rather than thrown to the floor.

She decided to release that memory to the others if she was safely repaired. That would give them the answer to accept that they were automatons.

She then gave herself into the fall.

"…"

Just before she hit the asphalt, her mind entered sleep mode.

Chapter 12

“Guidance of Thought”

Running shows you where you are headed
It is a path of no return where you stop and enter the early morning
Even that which guides you can only continue under that same illusion

●

Darkness had settled in on a large expanse of sand.

Several white geometric lines covered that schoolyard being prepared for the athletic festival.

The lights were already lit and boys and girls wearing track suits were drawing lines and setting up spectator seating on the edge in front of the school buildings.

A motorcycle was currently parked on the main road running by the schoolyard and continuing back to the academy's main entrance.

It was a foreign model with a sidecar, but no one sat on the motorcycle or in the sidecar and a plastic supermarket bag was placed in the sidecar. The bag contained enough fish and bread for two.

The two people who should have been there were standing in the schoolyard in casual clothes. One of them was a blonde girl who looked up to the black-haired boy next to her.

"This place is so big, Harakawa. Is it really a school?"

"It is, Heo. From what I've heard, some idiot bought it all up during the war while focusing on getting as much land as he could. He got carried away and also made some weird giant library and tried to lure in the people of the city. So what do you think? You said you wanted to see it, but it's not all that interesting."

Harakawa walked toward the center of the schoolyard. To avoid the lines drawn on the ground, he ended up following the 400 meter track line.

He then heard a rumbling in the sky above.

He tilted his head as he looked up at the large transport plane causing it.

"There have been a lot of those tonight. Supposedly an American plane crashed in Okutama. They were apparently borrowing Okutama IAI's runway."

"There was a city-wide broadcast about that earlier, right? They said the pilot of the crashed plane was…"

"They said he was fine, so don't worry, Heo Thunderson."

As they spoke, Harakawa saw Heo raise her head before lowering it again.

He recalled that her parents were gone and he realized the idea

of a plane crash was what made her lower her head.

…Is she meeting her great-grandfather at the cemetery to visit a grave?

Had her parents dealt with aircraft? But if they had been stationed on the American base, they would have been buried in the graveyard on the base, so he guessed her parents were civilians unrelated to the base.

While trying to decide what to say, he walked to the left of the school building.

Heo soon called out to him.

"Um, Harakawa? I've been thinking. This is a weird school, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose you would think that when you see it for the first time. Is anything in particular bothering you?"

"Y-yes. What is that giant statue of a hand by the southern wall over there?"

"Oh, that's from the ramen shop called The Fist that's a local sponsor of the athletic festival. It serves ramen hand-massaged by a tough old man. It's a bit famous for how the old man running the place plunges his hand into the boiling water and massages the noodles."

"Doesn't that burn his hand?"

"He says he manages through sheer willpower."

"That's amazing, Harakawa. …Are you sure this is a school?"

"Just to be clear, Heo, this place confuses me too."

"You don't seem to have a problem explaining it all."

…Really?

He mentally tilted his head while walking on.

Partially to change the subject, he asked a question that had been on his mind for a while.

"Well, you can't change how weird this place is. And speaking of weird, what language is your name, Heo?"

"I-it isn't weird. My…my parents gave it to me, but from what I've heard it's from the language a friend of my great-grandfather's spoke. He would never tell me what it means, but he said I didn't need to know. It might be the language of some small tribe."

At that point, a girl in a blue track suit passed by them while drawing a line. She was the member of the athletic festival

committee for Harakawa's class, so she spoke up even though he did not.

"Huh? I thought you were out today."

"I was, but my cousin wanted to go sightseeing around Tokyo."

Heo looked confused, but Harakawa continued adlibbing an explanation.

"My mother's sister married the chief of a tribe that shaves off one eyebrow and fights bears in the mountains of Utah. This girl is her daughter, but she decided to study abroad once the wave of information freedom reached their village. Still, her mother insisted she live somewhere with bears. Fortunately, we have them in Okutama and Hinohara."

"I-I see. There really are a lot of cultures out there."

"Yeah."

Harakawa nodded and looked around in order to end the conversation. He saw the large schoolyard, the school building that looked far too white under the lights, and the students.

"Weren't Sayama and Shinjou in charge of this area?"

"Th-those two… You hadn't heard? They left on a premarital vacation."

Heo was the first to react. She tugged on his left sleeve from behind and gave him an upturned look when he turned around.

"Two of the students are getting married?"

"If so, they'll have to deal with the large hurdle of overcoming gender. They'll probably have the wedding in California or something."

"Probably," replied the track suit girl with a smile.

She began to walk off with the line cart behind her, but then she turned around.

"We'll keep the two of you a secret too, okay?"

"Just to be clear, she isn't my girlfriend. More importantly, did our teacher say anything about me being absent?"

"If you're worried about it, don't skip class. Well, good luck."

She laughed and continued drawing the 400 meter line.

Harakawa sighed as he watched her leave and then turned to the right. He walked toward the south end of the schoolyard and heard quiet footsteps behind him.

"U-um, Harakawa. Did she think we were…" Her shoulders

tightened. “I’m sorry.”

“Any excuse would raise suspicion and people always hope they’re right about things. Don’t worry about it, Heo Thunderson. You won’t be around here long, so don’t waste your time thinking about it.”

He entered the shadow of the spectator seating to the south. It had ten rows of seats, it was about three meters tall, and it was primarily made of green pipes. He walked between the different seat structures that had been built by entire classes and left their shadows that resembled thick nets.

“Look, Heo Thunderson. This is what you wanted to see, isn’t it?”

However, he did not look ahead. He looked at Heo next to him.

As she left the shadows and stepped up to his right, she slowly looked forward. The bright lights caused her to narrow her eyes, but they soon widened.

“…”

A smile with some surprise mixed in appeared on her face.

After seeing that, Harakawa looked forward too.

“The freshmen are pretty motivated, so they’ve already finished their preparations. Look, Heo, these are the grounds prepared for the athletic festival. No matter which white line you follow, you will reach an athletic event.”

●

Heo felt a voice escape her mouth.

It sounded like an excited breath and she blushed while turning toward Harakawa.

While worried that had sounded strange, she spoke.

“That’s amazing, Harakawa. I used to run track, but I’ve never seen one like this.”

“Really?”

His eyebrows moved and he walked to the right. She wondered why and began to follow.

“Wait where you are, Heo Thunderson.”

“Eh? Wh-where are you going?”

He removed the watch he wore with the bracelet made of stones. He let it dangle from his right hand and pointed down with his left hand.

“Look at your feet.”

"…?"

She looked questioningly down.

Her sneakers were standing on a white figure drawn with lime. She stood in a one meter square box and five more were lined up vertically from her perspective. Each one had a number and hers was number one.

"What is this?"

"You can't tell? These are the lines for the 100 meter dash."

He walked down the line extending from the boxes.

He was already a good distance away and he raised his fairly deep voice so it would reach her.

"Since we're here, why not run a bit, Heo Thunderson?"

"Eh? But…"

She liked running. No, she *had* liked running.

She had not run much recently. If she did not count the run from the previous night…

…I haven't done it since three schools ago.

A lot more filled her mind as well, including her great-grandfather and what was going to happen now.

…But…

With that thought, she looked around the area.

She saw the stands, the lights, and the illuminated track. Harakawa stood at the other end of that illumination. He was too far to see his expression, but she could hear his voice.

"Aren't you coming, Heo? This can commemorate your arrival in Japan. Just run over here."

"Try not pointing back at that giant hand when you say that."

But…

"Can I really run?"

"The lines will need to be redrawn after a week anyway. Plus, no one's looking, so a girl with nothing else to do can steal herself a free commemoration here. What's wrong with that?"

That line made her smile bitterly.

…Why does he love sarcasm so much?

But he doesn't mean anything by it, she also thought. *He might actually use sarcasm to hide his good intentions.*

She saw him raise his right hand with a skull objet and the tall net fence for baseball behind him. He held his watch and she could tell

he intended to time her run.

She took one last look around and made sure no one was around.

"…"

She sank down, spread her hands a little farther out than her shoulders, and placed them on the ground.

She supported her body with only the tips of her fingers and relaxed her shoulders.

She brought her left leg back, pulled her right knee close enough that it touched her chest, and shrank down as if curling up.

"Heo, your starting pose is pretty good."

"They taught me this at a school I used to attend. The coach there was nice."

After speaking, she realized she was using sarcasm too.

She gave another bitter smile with her downturned face.

"Get set," called Harakawa without asking if she was ready.

She found that a little selfish but also felt a relieving sense that the situation was advancing on its own.

…He doesn't show any intent to let me relax.

His consideration mostly went unnoticed and had no obvious indication that he was telling her relax. That made her wonder if he was even now being considerate in a variety of ways she was not aware of.

But I'm probably imagining all that, she also thought.

He was the one who had helped her in this foreign land, so she was probably imagining these things like someone with a fever.

But then…

"————!!"

The sound of clapping hands cut into her thoughts.

For just an instant, the intruding sound caused her shoulders to jump.

"Nn."

But she still took in a breath and began.

She had once been taught how to do this. During her many school transfers, her life in those schools had been cut short again and again, but she had always chosen to join the track team and been taught how to run.

And this was what she had been taught.

…Run full speed from the very first step!

She extended her body as if launching it up and forward and her waist moved down and back, but she kicked off her left leg and sent that waist shooting forward.

“!”

She achieved a start that looked like a leap.

She ran.

The initial movements of her legs carried her lowered waist forward.

She then threw her leg forward while swinging her upper body.

Her heel caught on the ground and pulled her body forward and the toes of her other foot kicked off the ground to part with the track.

This produced wind. It was her personal wind that was created by her running.

…*Yes.*

She travelled through that wind and through the personal space she desired.

Her thoughts grew sharper.

She thought only about old times. Because she had not run in so long, she was reminded of what running meant to her.

…*It feels wonderful.*

She did not have to hear the horrible rumors surrounding her, she did not have to think about anything else, she could gain some kind of result that would remain even after she left, and she could gain a new method of earning even better results in the future.

Out of all the teachers in the schools, the track coaches had been the ones to most often look at her records without bringing the rumors into it.

Most of them had been women and they had given her advice on running after seeing her times. When she had followed that advice, she had gotten even faster.

Those teaching her to run had focused only on running.

She ran and assumed the line she had just passed was the fifty meter line.

She wondered whether she could become like those people.

If she came across someone like herself, would she be able to show them something more?

…*Teacher.*

I can't, concluded her sharpened thoughts.

Even she felt a demon was following her, so how could she find a way to teach and guide people?

She then recalled two things: a past event related to the act of running and the previous night.

The first was her mother.

"…!"

And the second was her great-grandfather who she had left the night before.

At both those times, she had run and it had been due to the consideration of her family members who had not wanted her to know what was happening.

…They had me run away.

That thought brought something else to mind.

It was a question that seemed to burn into the back of her brain.

…Is…

She let out a broken sigh.

…Is running away all anyone wants me to do?

●

Harakawa suddenly looked up while watching the stopwatch function on his watch.

Heo's footsteps had stopped.

"Hey."

When he called out and looked forward, he found her at about the seventy-five meter line of the first course.

Her legs had slowed to a stop, her head was lowered, and she was trembling.

…What?

He wondered if she had started feeling sick, but he mentally shook his head. That was nothing but his own convenient interpretation.

"…"

He silently stopped the stopwatch. The time had already reached twenty seconds. He had seen the time when she had reached the fifty meter mark, but recording the rest would be meaningless now.

He reset and then restarted the stopwatch before walking over to Heo and stopping the stopwatch again. He was pretty sure she had

reached fifty meters at approximately 6.8 seconds.

A few breaths after that, he arrived in front of her.

Her head was lowered and her hands were hiding her expression.

She did not speak, but her shoulders were rising and falling a little and he heard sobbing.

He had no intention of asking what was wrong. Everyone had their reasons for crying.

“Let’s go, Heo.”

She gave a shallow nod and replied in English.

“H-Harakawa, I…”

“Sorry, but I don’t know English.”

“R-really?”

“Really,” he answered in English.

She looked up a bit. There were tears in her eyes, but she still turned weakly toward him.

“Um…”

“What is it, Heo Thunderson?”

She took a single rough breath and steadied her breathing when she exhaled.

“I told you what happened last night, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

It took some time before she continued.

She clenched her fists and wiped at the corners of her eyes.

“Did I…run away and abandon my great-grandfather?”

And…

“Why do I always lose something when I run?”

“If that’s how you see it, then that must be how it is for you.”

“…”

She held her breath and looked toward him, but he continued regardless.

“Don’t ask questions that you already have your own answer to, Heo Thunderson. No matter what I say, you want to think about it your way. …As I said earlier, people with suspicions want to assume their thinking is correct.”

He inhaled and sighed.

With a bitter smile, he patted the silent girl’s shoulder and brought her gaze back onto him.

“But if you understand that, feel free to complain. Speaking it

aloud can make the thought fade. You often hear that, but it should work with questions that are dragging your mood down. So ask. Let out your heavy thoughts and deep worries. If it will help cheer you up, I'm willing to listen for as long as you're here in Japan."

"Y-you're mean, Harakawa."

"I'll feel better too if I'm listening to complaints meant to let off some steam instead of meaningless ones. And listen. We can't ask your great-grandfather what he thought of you last night. If you're going to feel like you abandoned him without even asking him if that's the case, you've entered the world of fortune-telling, Heo Thunderson."

"…"

"And there's something wrong with asking such an important question to some stranger you just met. Heo Thunderson, I won't say this again, so don't forget it. Remember it and start complaining."

He then thrust his watch toward her.

She had been thinking about what he had said, so she jumped in shock when the watch appeared in front of her.

"U-um? What is this?"

"This is more or less your time when you crossed the fifty meter line. How fast do you generally run a hundred meters?"

"Eh? Usually around thirteen seconds flat."

"I can't say for sure since we've got nothing but your memory and my eyes to go on, but you're the type that does better on the second half. You were at 6.8 seconds."

"…"

She fell silent, but the tears stopped.

She turned her weak gaze toward the watch and then at him.

"I need to run all the way to the end, don't I?"

She raised her teary face and forced a small smile.

"…"

But a sudden stroboscopic flash came from the left.

They turned that way and found the track suit girl from before and a few other people in track suits.

"Ooki-sensei too? What the hell are all of you doing!?"

"W-well, we wanted a chance to communicate with a foreigner. You don't see many of them around here."

“Based on your name, you’re half foreign.”

The students ran, but Ooki in her white track suit stayed behind and scratched at her head.

She looked up into the night sky and thought about what he had said. She finally gave a troubled smile and answered.

“Um… I kind of lost sight of myself there.”

Heo clearly did not understand what was going on, so Harakawa pushed on her back and started walking away from the schoolyard.

“H-Harakawa, was that woman…”

“You wouldn’t believe me, so I won’t even try to explain it.”

“D-don’t tell me she’s a teacher. Sh-she isn’t, is she? I-is she a… um…I’m not sure how to put it.”

“Do you want to be shocked by this country that much, Heo Thunderson?”

As they walked away, the colors of evening completely vanished from the sky.

However, there were still several shapes in that sky. They were all transport ships flying northwest toward Okutama.

●

Japanese UCAT’s new headquarters floor was a large space on the second basement with a large screen filling the front wall, but the people inside the room now were not those meant to be there.

The people all wore blue armored uniforms.

They sat at the various communications desks, exchanged data, and spoke to each other, but one person was climbing the stairs to the upper bridge.

He was a young man wearing glasses and a gray suit and he brushed a hand through his hair when he arrived on the bridge.

“Colonel Odor, the fifth basement and below are indeed sealed off both physically and conceptually.”

“Roger, Roger. How long until we can break in?”

“Testament. This is just an estimate, but…I do not know.”

“Roger, Roger. Have you ever thought of yourself as incompetent?”

“Testament. Only when I fail to wake up in the morning.” Roger pushed his glasses up his nose. “Colonel, the UCAT branches around Japan are all on alert. Izumo’s western general headquarters has

sent an objection and a demand of withdrawal to the UCAT Alliance Bureau."

"It is no use. Unfortunately for them, it is no use. American UCAT has already received the other nations' understanding and the United States is the chief nation of the Alliance Bureau. You could say the entire world is our motherland."

"Also, colonel, while I was out holding off two members of Team Leviathan in Akigawa, the team searching for traces of last night's concept space gave me this."

Roger reached into his pocket and pulled out a circular object.

It was a necklace made from stones.

"It was lying on the road with the clasp open and it is thought to belong to Heo Thunderson."

"Roger, Roger. Why do they think that?"

"It matches the necklace she is wearing in her photograph in our records. The team searching for her in Akigawa has been instructed to remove the necklace from their description of her."

Odor gave a satisfied nod before speaking.

"More importantly… More importantly, how is the situation?"

"Testament. Of the twelve Blanca 9s in our unit, five were destroyed, two were badly damaged, and the remaining five were all lightly damaged. Their numbers will be recovered with replacements from the nearby base and exchanging the damaged components. Of the other soldiers on the front lines, seven were seriously injured and almost everyone else was lightly injured."

"Then… Then, Roger, what about Japanese UCAT?"

"Testament. Eighteen were seriously injured and we have twenty-seven in custody after they surrendered. They were mostly personnel with disabilities, but they include members of Team Leviathan."

"Is that so?"

Odor looked down at the first floor where an old man was playing a missile game using one of the consoles.

"Would that be… Would that be this pitiable old man named Ooshiro, Roger?"

"To an outsider, he may look pitiable, but he is a troublesome creature who has no problem with it himself."

"R-Roger-kun! I see you're as calm and cement-like as ever!"

Ooshiro turned around for just an instant, but he quickly focused back on the missiles flying on the screen.

In the same way, Odor turned back toward Roger.

“Do you know him? Do you know him, Roger? Explain this immediately.”

“Testament. While I was stationed in Japan with American UCAT, a lot of…unpleasant things happened.”

“Roger, Roger. Listen carefully. Hardships are what fuel one’s life. I personally don’t like them, though. And tell me, Roger. Do we have any members of Team Leviathan other than him?”

“Testament.” Roger formed a smile on the corner of his mouth. “We have Team Leviathan’s supervisor and the girl who contains 3rd-Gear’s Concept Core. We are still clearing the facility, so they are currently in the temporary headquarters we erected on the runway. Also…”

“Roger, Roger. If you have something to say, just say it. I will not stand for it if you say something that annoys me, though.”

“Testament. We have received an interesting call.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a remote for the large screen.

He pressed a button and light filled the black screen.

“It is the boy named Sayama Mikoto who acts as Team Leviathan’s negotiator.”

With that, the head and shoulders of a boy appeared on the wall-sized screen.

The shot was from a slightly low angle. The boy wore a suit and lightly rocked his rocking chair in a dim but furnished room. A small yellow animal sat on his right shoulder and his left hand held a large glass filled with a yellow liquid.

He smiled and nodded while continuing to look down on them.

“I suppose I should say it is a pleasure to meet you, American UCAT.”

His calm voice caused all of the American UCAT members to tense up, but despite seeing that, the boy continued to gently rock his chair. He finally stopped that slight back and forth and opened his mouth.

“I am Sayama Mikoto, negotiator for Team Leviathan…and the man at the center of the universe.”

Odor reflexively shouted out and pointed at Sayama.

“Roger! Roger! Is this who we’ve been entrusting the world too all this time!? Thank god we have arrived to correct this! What is your opinion of this!?”

“Testament. To be entirely honest, it is a bit of a strange feeling.”

“Ha ha ha. People rarely understand true greatness when they first see it. There is nothing to be ashamed of.”

Sayama held up his glass and took a sip.

He let out a small sigh, held up the glass once more, and looked at them through it.

“The tolerant Sayama Empire will give one final chance to American UCAT for fighting so valiantly. Will you submit, cry, and bow down in apology or will you unconditionally surrender, strip naked, and fully prostrate yourselves?”

“Submit? Submit? Unconditionally surrender!? Which one of us are you imagining will be doing this!?”

“America of course. …But calm down. You are ruining my orange juice.”

Odor turned to Roger and silently pointed at Sayama. And he did it again.

Roger sighed and raised his palms toward Odor. He was telling the elderly man to remain silent. He then cleared his throat and crossed his arms.

“Negotiator Sayama, to help this run more smoothly, I would like for both sides to spell out their demands. How does that sound to you?”

“Oh? Do you really think you are in any position to negotiate with me?”

With his arms still crossed, Roger pointed his left hand down.

“We have Japanese UCAT Director Ooshiro Kazuo in our custody.”

“So?”

“M-Mikoto-kun! That statement could be interpreted in some pretty horrible ways!”

“Calm down, old man. Your interpretation is entirely correct. How clever of you.”

Roger saw Ooshiro pull his legs up on his chair and pretend to cry, but Roger did not groan or grow angry because this was within his

expectations.

"We also have some other Team Leviathan members and general injured personnel under our control."

"You are taking care of them, I assume. Normally, we would need to pay you for that service, but it appears American UCAT is currently lodging in Japanese UCAT. We can simply let those two expenses cancel each other out. How many nights are you planning to stay? If it is more than one, each additional two hours will mean an additional fee."

"In that case, we will make up for it by providing services for those under our care."

"An excellent solution." Sayama placed his glass outside the screen and intertwined his fingers over his stomach. "Now, let me ask you this: what are your demands?"

Roger re-crossed his arms before answering.

"First, stop the Leviathan Road. Second, transfer authority for the Leviathan Road to the UCAT Alliance. Third, send all the Concept Cores possessed by Japanese UCAT to the UCAT Alliance. Fourth…" He threw his words at Sayama. "Turn the currently missing Heo Thunderson over to American UCAT. Those are our four demands."

●

Roger watched Sayama on the screen.

The boy's expression had not moved in the slightest as Roger had listed the demands.

However…

"I see. In other words, you are here to crush the Leviathan Road, aren't you?"

"No, we will not crush it. We will restructure it so that it is safer and more acceptable than at present."

"What proof do you have of this alleged safety?"

Roger glanced over at Odor and the elderly man nodded twice, so Roger pushed his glasses back up his nose and continued.

"Testament. Currently, American mechanical dragons are being stationed with all the American UCAT forces located in America's bases in Japan. A total of forty-eight dragons have been sent. With the additional soldiers and personnel with special abilities also being

sent, we estimate we can defend against an attack from a 3rd-Gear god of war or a 5th-Gear mechanical dragon."

"So was that one of you that fought the black mechanical dragon last night?"

"Testament. That was Colonel Odor here. Although Japanese UCAT reinforcements eliminated the dragon before he could complete his interception."

"I see." Sayama nodded. "May I ask a question?"

"Testament."

"Why do you wish to be given the girl named Heo Thunderson?"

Roger looked to Odor again and he once more nodded twice, so Roger reached his right hand into his pocket.

"Heo Thunderson has a past worthy of our attention. While still young, she and her mother were attacked by a dragon."

"A dragon?"

"Testament. Mr. Richard Thunderson would not provide the details, but the evidence left behind was proof enough. The shape in the air seen at the scene, the footprints, and the metal pieces scattered about belonged to the large black 5th-Gear mechanical dragon known as Black Sun."

"And what does that mean concerning Heo Thunderson?"

"Testament. There were two large mechanical dragons in 5th-Gear and American UCAT believes the hostile black one named Black Sun may be targeting the Thunderson family as the destroyers of 5th-Gear. The attack on Mr. Thunderson last night has more or less proven it."

Sayama frowned slightly on the screen.

"In other words, it proved that American UCAT is justified in using the girl carrying Thunderson's blood as bait to call in Black Sun and destroy it?"

"No. You are half wrong there, Negotiator Sayama. We will take in Heo Thunderson, but that is to ensure she is not left defenseless. The attack last night also proved that Black Sun will approach any 5th-Gear concept." Roger pointed down with his left hand. "And half of 5th-Gear's Concept Core is here. This place is the greatest bait of all. We will bring Heo Thunderson here to strengthen that bait, but as soon as Black Sun has been detected, we will quickly have her evacuated. She will be sent to an American city protected by UCAT

where she can live the rest of her life in peace without having to fear an attack."

"I see. So you have that much information."

"We also know that the other half of 5th-Gear's Concept Core is held by Black Sun, so you cannot use it as a bargaining chip. In fact, we know the identity of the weapon located below here."

"I am sure my comrades who have escaped down there will also learn that, so it too would be worthless as a bargaining chip."

"Testament."

Roger admitted it with a bitter smile and bowed with his right hand still in his pocket.

Sayama then leaned forward on the screen.

"Neither of us can bargain using information on 5th-Gear, so let me ask again," he said. "Why would you stop the Leviathan Road? Do not bother with your official reasons. Give me reasons with a clear basis. One of the Eight Great Dragon Kings developed this supposedly inviolable negotiation, so why would the likes of American UCAT attempt to stop it?"

This was the same question the girl named Sibyl had asked Odor before the battle on the surface had begun.

This time, Roger began his answer with "testament" and finally pulled his right hand from his pocket.

He pulled out an envelope which he held up before removing its contents. He produced a quickly-written handwritten text with a signature and seal at the end.

"This was given to us before Mr. Richard Thunderson travelled to Japan. First of all, it says that full authority over 5th-Gear was temporarily transferred from White Creation to Mr. Thunderson when 5th-Gear was destroyed."

"Full authority? Do you have any proof of this?"

"Why do you think 5th-Gear's Concept Core weapon was left with Japanese UCAT? The reason is written here and signed. Mr. Thunderson temporarily received that weapon from White Creation and requested to have it stored in Japanese UCAT until the time came to fight Black Sun once more."

Roger spread out the letter.

"I doubt you can read it for yourself, but I will read the end of the letter for you. 'If I, Richard Thunderson, die or go missing, I leave

all authority I hold at the time to American UCAT. September 15, 2005.' That is about a week before he left. Do you understand now?" asked Roger. "5th-Gear has no people, so even though Mr. Thunderson only received that full authority temporarily, he had no one to hand it back to. …But now that he has died, that full authority lies with us in American UCAT. And that means we can act on 5th-Gear's behalf to decide whether they will accept the Leviathan Road or not."

●

Roger refolded the letter and spoke to Sayama.

"Concepts can be used to determine the validity of this letter. At any rate, we will obey this letter which has become Mr. Richard Thunderson's will by taking on full authority for 5th-Gear and rejecting the Leviathan Road as dangerous. You on the other hand…"

"Yes, tomorrow morning, I intend to carry out the Leviathan Road in the 4th-Gear reservation."

Sayama remained expressionless as he answered and Roger placed the envelope back in his pocket.

"Are you saying you will not take our demands into account?"

"Please make no mistake here. The Leviathan Road with 4th-Gear has already begun and has mutual understanding between both parties. Will you really stop this after they have agreed and wish to begin? If that leads 4th-Gear to distrust Low-Gear, whose responsibility will it be?"

Roger gave a quick downward glance. The large greenhouse containing 4th-Gear's residents was located on the fourth basement, so he looked to a member of the communication team looking into that.

"…"

But the man looked up at him and shook his head to say that area had been purged.

Roger gave a mental sigh and spoke only the fact he had just received.

"It is true we have no way of communicating with 4th-Gear at the moment."

"In that case, you have no way of entering the 4th-Gear

reservation. Other than intruding without permission, that is. Are you going to locate us and rush in to attack us?”

“Negotiator Sayama, what if we went to take you into our custody?”

“This hotel has excellent service. They apparently firmly eliminate any suspicious intruders. Also, let me introduce you to an interesting friend of mine.”

Sayama stood from his chair.

He returned after a few seconds and placed a travel bag on his lap once he sat back down. Everyone frowned when they saw the thick black bag.

However, he showed no sign of caring.

“This friend enjoys warm, stuffy places, so this room is too chilly for him.”

He opened the bag and something stood up from within with the sound of something striking the air.

It resembled a dog, but it had six legs and its long fur was actually narrow conifer leaves.

“This is someone who could be referred to as 4th-Gear itself.”

●

Roger saw the plant creature turn what seemed to be its face toward them through the screen.

Everyone around the consoles gulped and they heard the plant creature’s thoughts.

“Sayama. Cold.”

“Oh, my apologies. However, our hostile allies seem to want to say hello.”

At that, the creature raised its head from within the opened travel bag.

It had a blue philosopher’s stone hanging from its neck on a string. Roger guessed it was a weakened version of a 4th-Gear concept, but knowing that did not help.

He simply listened to the creature’s thought which took the form of a question.

“Allies?”

However, everyone was frozen in place more by the sight before them than by the question.

Finally, someone broke through the frozen atmosphere.

It was Odor who stood to Roger's right.

He stepped forward and grabbed the metal railing of the bridge with both hands.

"How dare you!? How dare you!? You are imprisoning a resident of another Gear!!"

"Unfortunately, they have a collective consciousness. Even if a single individual is here, the remaining whole is elsewhere. The idea of imprisonment does not apply. If you wish to say it does, you must ignore their collective consciousness. Am I wrong?"

"Then… Then it is abduction!! You have abducted a portion of the collective consciousness!!"

Sayama let out a breath and peered down at the plant creature on his lap.

"What do you think?"

"Go with Sayama. Promise."

He nodded twice at that and exaggeratedly pressed on the inner corners of his eyes.

"Did you hear that? I have approval. You could say we are best of friends."

"Roger! Roger! Say something!"

"Colonel, to be completely honest, I have trouble with adlibbing."

Nevertheless, Roger turned toward Sayama while the boy closed the plant creature back in the travel bag.

He saw the creature's plant fur disappear into the gap.

"Negotiator Sayama, is this what you are trying to say? If anything happens to you, it will all be conveyed to 4th-Gear through that 4th-Gear resident's shared consciousness?"

"Precisely. I decided the best way for them to learn what kind of person I am and whether I am trustworthy was to have them send someone along to observe me. Their ability to communicate via their collective consciousness is not all that strong, but this one can likely get through while so close to the reservation."

"Testament. Then, Negotiator Sayama, we will provisionally approve of the Leviathan Road with 4th-Gear that is currently underway."

"I assume there is a 'but' coming."

"Testament. No matter how much you attempt to deny it, our

demands are the demands of all UCATs and we have Mr. Thunderson's will to support us. Do you have any way of denying that?"

"I would like to say no, but may I say one thing first?"

"Testament."

Sayama lowered the travel bag from the chair and adjusted his position.

He gave one shallow rock of the chair before speaking.

"American UCAT has exposed Japanese UCAT's lack of strength by trapping them underground and you have demanded the rights to the Concept Cores. In that case, I assume you will accept the demands of the victor if you are driven out by force. As a lesson to those like us who refused to obey, surely you would submit to those victors."

"Do you really think that is possible?" asked Odor while grabbing the railing. "Do you really think you can defeat us?"

Sayama replied with a smile.

"The time for prostration draws nigh, gentlemen."

"How dare you!? How dare you!?"

Odor's shoulders swelled up with strength, but he was interrupted.

"I beat it!!!"

The shout came from down below. Roger looked down and saw an old man in a lab coat dancing on top of a console. The console's screen displayed the missile game from before, but it now only showed the word "complete". Ooshiro threw his hands into the air and spun around and around.

"I finally beat Sibyl-kun! This is my first victory over her!"

As soon as Ooshiro laughed and jumped down to the floor, Sayama reached his hand down and off the screen.

A hole opened in the floor where Ooshiro was about to land and he fell right on through. The floor immediately closed back.

"I am so very sorry you had to see that," said Sayama.

"H-He got away! He got away! That boy assisted his escape, Roger!"

"No, colonel. I believe that was the proper decision."

But just as Odor turned back to the screen, a new person walked into view from the right.

A girl was walking by behind the boy.

Her wet black hair was swept behind her bare shoulders and her chest on down were hidden behind a bath towel.

The men at the consoles let out voices of excitement.

Rather than continuing past Sayama, the girl turned toward him while in front of the bed behind him.

“Sayama-kun, what are you watching? A TV show?”

“Yes, you could call it an American group skit show. How was your bath?”

“I just had to wash away the sweat, so it didn’t take long. A-also, I want to wait until the hot spring to just sit and soak. …Will you join me there tonight?”

A stir came over the men down below and Odor frantically turned toward Roger.

“Roger! Roger! Are the Japanese youth really this sexually depraved!?”

“Testament. Forty percent of the child pornography on the internet is made in Japan while the Japanese only make up approximately two percent of the world population. Based on that, the child pornography rate of the Japanese is approximately twenty times the world standard and their child pornography potential index far exceeds that.”

“Dreadful! What a dreadful race!”

As Odor cried out, the girl on the screen spoke to Sayama.

“Um, but Sayama-kun? I haven’t actually changed yet even though it’s already 6:30.”

“Are you stuck that way now?”

The girl shook her head.

“I can feel the signs of it coming, so I think it was just delayed. I guess it’s like when you want to sneeze but aren’t quite there yet. I should change after a bit longer, but…do you think this might be it? When the body is active, does it wait for that to finish before it changes?”

“If so…”

“If we do that kind of thing while I’m Sadame…I might not change until it finishes. We haven’t tested it yet though, so it’s best not to think too much about it. Also…”

The girl sounded hesitant.

“Did I…really manage to do it?”

“You simply do not remember because you passed out. As I said before, it was not complete, but you did accomplish the early stages, Shinjou-kun. Would you like to see the handkerchief that proves it?”

“Eh?” She looked confused and she blushed. “Yes…you can give a detailed explanation later. And I might be so happy I cry, but I won’t mean it in a bad way, so support me.”

She gave a small smile.

“It’s strange. I disliked Setsu so much, and yet it’s started with him first.”

“Roger, Roger. Are they speaking in some kind of code!?”

“Testament. As far as I can tell, they may be discussing the functional state of some form of transforming weapon.”

“Hmm.”

Odor crossed his arms while the girl on the screen placed a bag on the bed.

The soft sound of something heavy crushing the blanket came from the speakers while Sayama nodded.

“If you are going to change, make it your clothes for going out. I would like to treat ourselves to a meal out in order to celebrate.”

“Sure. Just face that way, okay?”

“Very well.”

Sayama looked back toward the screen and Shinjou turned her back behind him.

He reached below the screen and red text appeared in the upper left corner. The text read, “The target camera has begun recording.”

“Roger, Roger. What is going on?”

“Testament. He has set the camera on his end to record what we are currently seeing.”

At that time, a cheer rose from the men at the consoles down below.

Roger looked up and saw Shinjou had just dropped the bath towel on the screen.

The dim light just barely illuminated the flowing line of her skin from shoulders to sides and waist to butt, but then she turned to the side and revealed her chest.

“Roger! Roger! What is this!? That is…a boy!!”

“Testament. If my knowledge is correct, Japan has long since been this way. As a part of their etiquette, the military commanders of the Sengoku period would hole up in isolated rooms, compete over their ability to properly hold a tea ceremony, and show off their tea sets.”

“I can’t believe it. I can’t believe Japan is that sort of country.”

On the screen, Shinjou began by placing a light brown garter around her waist and slowly putting on brown stockings one at a time.

“Ah…Nn. These really are tight. And doing this tickles.”

“Do you need help, Shinjou-kun?”

“No, no!! I can do it on my own! I love not troubling you with helping!”

As she forced a smile and stretched out her leg to put on the stocking, the men down below took various troubled poses and made a variety of different groans.

…Could this be a psychological attack from Japanese UCAT?

As Roger wondered that, Shinjou stood up and put on some white panties.

She turned her back to the screen and pulled a bra from her bag.

“But Sayama-kun, what are you watching? It isn’t a dirty video, is it? Don’t do that. I don’t want you heading in too weird a direction.”

“Roger! Roger! Tell them to look in a mirror!”

“Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, this has gotten quite funny.”

“Really? Is it that funny a show?”

After putting on her bra, Shinjou put on a beige blouse and turned around.

She walked up next to Sayama with a puzzled look.

“…?”

She wrinkled her brow even further as she peered into the screen.

“Um, Sayama-kun? I won’t get mad, so will you listen to what I say here?”

She smiled and looked to Sayama.

“This looks a lot like Japanese UCAT’s new headquarters.”

“Ha ha ha. Funny, isn’t it, Shinjou-kun?”

Sayama’s laughter was followed by a metallic sound and the screen shaking. The camera footage made one final shake and then

only showed the ceiling.

“Wh-what are you thinking, Sayama-kun!? You just let people see me naked and hear me talk about my first time! And why are a bunch of weird foreigners in the new headquarters!? Are they peeping toms!?”

“We are not! Tell him we are not, Roger!”

“Colonel, in this case, I believe we have no choice but to accept their opinion.”

“U-um, Sayama-kun? I don’t want anyone but you to see that! And what if a rumor that I’m an exhibitionist ends up all over the world!? Those countries don’t even censor anything!”

“Do not worry. I am the only one to record the footage, Shinjou-kun. I will keep you all to myself.”

“Don’t twist this in your favor!”

With the sound of shattering glass, the footage and sound from the large screen blacked out.

“…”

No one knew how to respond to the sudden disconnection.

Roger frowned, Odor did the same next to him, and the American UCAT members down below stood up from the consoles.

For a short time, they all took five or so breaths in the complete silence.

Afterwards, Roger spoke quietly as if to test the silence. He did so with a hand on his chin.

“It seems we are not going to get a satisfying conclusion here.”

Chapter 13

“Mutual Words”

Check on them
Even when you pass them by
Make it so you are looking to the other side of them

●

Two people were crouched down in a ten square meter room with a tatami mat floor.

The fluorescent light with a Japanese-style umbrella over it lit them from the ceiling as they stuck their heads into the bottom shelf of the closet.

“Harakawa, I’ve pulled out all the beer and laid out the futon.”

“And I’ve put up the curtain, Heo.”

Heo crawled out of the closet wearing boy’s pajamas. She sat down, clapped her hands, and waited for Harakawa to crawl out and sit next to her.

He was still wearing his outdoor clothes and he held some extra curtain clips as he crawled out. He sat cross-legged and looked toward the short curtain that now blocked off the bottom of the closet.

“This looks really cheaply done.”

“B-but it’s where I’m going to sleep.”

“Then the lodging and dinner fare will be equally cheap, Heo Thunderson.”

She shrank down in dejection, looked at him, and lowered her shoulders.

“I’m sorry, but if I’m alone, I’ll remember all the horrible things and get too scared.”

“I’ll agree with you that this isn’t normal. I gave you the option of going to the police or IAI.”

“But this isn’t enough to warrant that.”

“But it’s apparently enough to interrupt my life. Don’t forget that, Heo.”

It took her several seconds to respond with “I won’t.”

He turned around and found her head lowered.

“And did you not think about the possibility that I would attack you?”

“I can trust you.”

She raised her head and lightly held her body as if to protect it, but she looked him in the eye.

“You’re, um, well…”

As her words trailed off, he jerked his chin forward.

"Just say it. I won't get mad."

"Y-you're already mad."

He sighed. *Why is she so hard to speak with?* he wondered while leaning down and dragging over the table they had used for dinner. He rested his elbows on it to support himself.

"I'll say it first, so listen. What would you do if I did something to you? The trains are still running and the business hotel's front desk will still be open, so let me give you a chance to rethink this. You're staying in some strange guy's house, so what if something happened to you? Heo, this is more than being afraid. It could traumatize you for life."

"But I don't think you would do something like that."

"How can you be sure?"

"Do you want to force me to do that kind of thing?" She tilted her head. "If so, you could have done it when I was in the bath earlier. Or when I was making dinner or when we were cleaning out the closet. You've had plenty of chances already."

"What if I suddenly give into temptation? Or what if I'm oddly methodical and I've decided to wait until some kind of gauge reaches its peak at one in the morning? I could be saying all this to get you to trust me."

"But then anywhere would be the same." She shook her head and lowered the ends of her eyebrows. "If I stay in the hotel alone, someone could open the lock and enter my room. Not to mention if I get thirsty in the night and head to the hotel store or when I leave my room in the morning. Everything becomes suspicious. I will doubt myself, but with others…"

She trailed off there and sighed after some time of silence had passed.

She then gave a smile. She closed her eyes and lowered the ends of her eyebrows as she did so.

"And if you were really plotting something, wouldn't you normally try to make me feel at ease? Why would you keep acting like you're a potential criminal?"

"By saying that up front, I can escape responsibility. If I tell you I'm a bad person, it's your fault for staying with me."

"Then you're a bad person that will attack me if I stay here?" asked Heo while opening her eyes. "In that case, running would be

meaningless. You could attack me now, while I'm changing before heading to the hotel, while you take me to the hotel on your motorcycle, or tomorrow when you're taking me to the cemetery."

She gave a small awkward smile.

"In that case, I can only ask you to do it now if you're going to. All of the bad things in my past came suddenly and I was told to run away."

She looked around the room and spotted the closed window and door.

“But if you do it now, I’m ready and I can’t run away.”

She took in a breath, fixed her collar as if she had decided something, and turned so she sat facing him. She then leaned forward and placed her hands on the floor.

“Please begin.”

“Just get to sleep!!” shouted Harakawa from the gut.

●

Harakawa mentally clicked his tongue.

The part of him that had made him shout out brought a curse to mind.

…What a terrible feeling.

His shout had surprised Heo into sitting up straight and the look on her face made him want to say something.

…Yeah, what a truly terrible feeling.

And…

…I’m causing it as much as she is.

“U-um… Can I spend the night here?”

“I’ve given up.”

“Thank you.”

…Don’t smile like that, you idiot.

He pointed toward the closet and she flipped up the curtain with the lithe movements of a cat. She switched on the lamp placed in the back and turned toward him.

“Um, are you sure you want to leave your cell phone in here?”

“If you press the address book button, the top entry is the police. If you can’t trust me anymore, call them.”

She laughed bitterly and narrowed her eyes.

“That would only be if I doubted you.”

She then peered further in.

“Can I ask something else?”

He knew what she was trying to say.

“You mean the bookshelf?”

“Yes. Can I read something until I fall asleep? U-unless it’s full of books meant for boys…”

“All of those are with an underclassman, so don’t worry. The ones in there are all meaningless novels.”

“No, these are the classics, aren’t they? I recognize some of the

titles when I translate them into English.”

“Are you surprised?”

“No.”

That response brought movement to Harakawa’s eyebrows. Beyond the pajama-covered butt sticking out of the closet, Heo was looking at the bookshelf.

“I’m not a fortune teller, so everything about others is unexpected. But that’s exactly why I view anything I found out about them as normal.”

“Are there unexpected things about you?”

It was a cheerful question and he was expecting her to tell him about an interest of hers or something she liked.

However…

“That isn’t possible.”

For a quick moment, she turned a resigned smile toward him from the closet, but she changed the subject immediately afterwards.

“Oh, this is Golinger’s Catch Them in the Rye. We were reading it at my previous school, but I didn’t finish it before transferring away. I’ll borrow this one, okay?”

Brightness filled her voice and she moved beyond the curtain.

She closed the curtain to cut off their view of each other and Harakawa finally relaxed his shoulders.

“I’m turning out the lights.”

“Eh? I’ll be up a while longer with the lamp in here, so you don’t need to hurry.”

“Would you rather leave the closet and turn off the lights once you start feeling sleepy? I have a work light out here, so I’ll be fine. Or should I close the closet door to make it darker in there?”

“No, that sounds too claustrophobic.”

“That settles it.”

Harakawa stood up and turned out the lights.

He heard the rustling of clothes in the closet as she lay down. He pulled a memory headphone stereo from his own clothes and removed the headphones.

He plugged them into the TV, put on just one ear of the headphones, and turned on the sports news. He listened to the baseball commentary with one ear while listening to Heo turn the pages with the other.

…The sound of someone else turning the pages, hm?

He found it somehow nostalgic as he rested his elbows on the table and looked to the TV.

He then heard a voice.

"Um…"

"What is it, Heo Thunderson?"

"Thank you very much. I just felt I had to say that before going to sleep."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

He received silence in return, but he thought that was fine.

…Words don't get through to her anyway.

He began to wonder why and found the answer almost instantly.

…Because we're opposites.

They had both lost at least one parent and mostly lived alone.

However, something in Heo's past had made her doubt herself and that anxiety had apparently led to repeatedly transferring between schools. From what he had heard in the morning and during dinner, something had killed her mother.

…A demon, huh?

He had his doubts about the giant footprints and fragments of metal, but even if it was some kind of trick, the fact remained that someone had died. Various rumors had followed Heo around and that suspicion and misunderstanding had spread regardless of the facts.

However, Heo tried to trust others despite doubting herself due to the supposed demon.

…And then there's me.

He could only think of opposites there and he brushed his hands through his hair with his elbows still on the table.

…What a terrible feeling.

He repeated the same thought as earlier and there was something that bothered him.

It was one quick answer from their previous conversation.

…That isn't possible, hm?

And back at the school, she had stopped partway through running down the track.

"It's impossible for her…"

"Eh?"

He heard a voice and mentally clicked his tongue.

"Just talking about the baseball game. A new team called the Kemco Stars is playing and I was complaining that their main hitter, Bombuzal, hasn't gotten any hits yet. Sorry."

"Were you really?"

"Heo, are you doubting that I'm a fan of the Kemco Stars?"

"N-no, that's your choice. I'm a fan of the New York Yankee Go Homes, but, um…"

The question arrived.

"Did something bother you?"

That made him gulp, which kept him from immediately speaking and let him think instead.

…That's right.

It was true he had also blamed himself for the terrible feeling that Heo bowing down had caused him, but…

"No, I'm fine. You worry too much."

As he replied, he managed to get a grasp on the terrible feeling within him.

He only managed to do so when thinking about her and himself along with the phrase "that isn't possible".

He didn't know what this was leading him to, but he could tell it was related to his current situation and he could feel himself getting closer to understanding it.

"…"

But then he stopped thinking. His current life was built atop his current situation and changing that just because of a sense of dissatisfaction or a "terrible feeling" felt like it would prevent him from continuing this lifestyle.

…And I need to make enough money to cover my mom's hospital bills.

He may have seen something of himself in Heo, but she would most likely return to her normal life the following day. Her connection to him would vanish and he would return to his normal life as well.

In that case, he saw no reason to expose this slight dissatisfaction.

…I'm happiest the way I am.

That was called looking to the future.

As he thought, his gaze stopped in one corner of the room. The beer cans that had been in the closet were there. He got up, moved around the table, grabbed one, and opened it with the sound of carbonation.

"Um, Harakawa?"

The closet was now to his left and he heard Heo speak from the lit area beyond the curtain.

He got up on one knee as he responded.

"What is it, Heo Thunderson? Is it about the book? Have you figured out the identity of the spy who made the crop circle in the rye to contact the Soviet satellite?"

"No, but I think he's the crewmember of the glowing object that flew through the eastern sky. …But that isn't what I wanted to say. Um, does beer taste good?"

"No, it doesn't. But does it feel good when you run, Heo Thunderson?"

"Eh?"

He heard the rustling of clothes and assumed she was sitting up.

Weren't you trying to get to sleep? he thought with a frown.

"Running is exhausting…but it feels good."

"That sounds like you're coming out as a masochist, Heo Thunderson. But it's the same thing here. It's the accomplishment that's…"

He trailed off there.

…That isn't something to say when I never do anything myself.

"Um, Harakawa? I'm sorry."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Heo Thunderson."

She remained silent but produced more rustling of clothes as she lay back down.

Harakawa lowered his shoulders in a small sigh and looked toward the curtain.

He saw Heo there, but not directly. The light of the lamp set up in the back of the closet projected her silhouette on the light yellow curtain.

She was crouching low and she brought a hand to her chest.

"…"

And she opened the collar to remove it from her shoulders.

Her shadowy silhouette now showed the lines of her body from

the shoulders down.

The shadow Heo then stretched her legs to the side and slowly pulled down what covered her legs so as not to make any noise. However, she lost her balance.

“Ah.”

Harakawa used her voice as a starting point.

“What is it, Heo Thunderson?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just preparing for bed.”

…Is she the type that sleeps in the nude?

There were a lot like that on the base, so he guessed there were also a lot back in their country.

So as not to intrude, he stood up with the beer in hand, turned off the TV, and removed the headphones.

“Um, where are you going?”

“To work on my motorcycle. I’ll keep the door open as I work, so call out if you need something. Also, Japan can get pretty chilly at the beginning of fall, so try not to catch a cold because you’re naked.”

“Oh, thanks. …You can see me!?”

He walked to the front door without responding.

He heard the curtain move a little behind him and assumed she was poking her head out.

…What a strange girl.

With that thought, he opened the door and took a step outside.

Out there, he found the night and saw the moon in the sky.

●

A certain place was almost completely dark.

It was an underground space that did not let in any outside light. It was a large area and the concrete floor lined with countless containers covered at least three hundred square meters. The western, southern, and northern walls contained metal shields much like ribs and those ribs supported the ceiling about fifty meters up.

The eastern wall was separated from the floor, the ceiling, and the other walls and only a giant pit existed there.

The flow of air created in that hole slowly washed over the dark area.

The floor with only three walls was lit by bluish-white reserve

lights with long gaps between them. Much like scattered streetlights, they placed light below them and did little else to combat the darkness.

However, those were not the only lights.

At the northwest corner, light filled the twenty meter space between the containers and the walls.

They were indoor lights including fluorescents and incandescents. There were a great number of them and they pointed in countless directions. The area they illuminated continued for two hundred meters along the wall.

Many people filled that area of light and they were performing various kinds of work.

Those closest to the corner had medical duty. The injured were placed on top of a few simple medical beds made from sheets and a short woman gave instructions to four old men and the other medical staff.

“Listen. When applying healing charms, pay attention to where their joints are. It’s easy to forget when you’re in a hurry. Also, prepare a treatment space behind that container for the women!”

As the others moved around, those who had already received treatment lay on sleeping bags and air mattresses in place of beds, sat around, or played handheld games together.

“Ha ha ha. That Pikachew you raised is mine now! The bullet wound on my leg is throbbing, but I’m on my way to catching ‘em all!! You were careless to challenge me with an old non-backlit model!”

“Is that why you asked me to fight!?”

“Shut up both of you. I had to fight after the night shift, so let me sleep.”

Next to the injured, the evacuated engineers set up a space for themselves and their equipment and spoke with their superiors to gather together the data from the battle and to adjust the schedules for their normal work. Most of them used the power sources on the wall to boot up the computers they had brought with them and then connected to the LAN. A lot of them managed to restart their work and one of them spoke up.

“So even after all this, we still have to work.”

“Well, the field operation guys worked to protect us, so now it’s

our turn to work and recover from this. If you've got some spare time, help out over there."

The man in the lab coat pointed toward the food area to the east of the evacuees. A long table meant for meetings had a large pot and buckets lined up on it. Beyond the table were the cafeteria chief and Ooki.

"Hi, everyone. I made food for you all today. Make sure you eat lots and lots. It's a stew with a chocolate and pork bone broth and I got so carried away I added in beans, beef, and avocado. Something sweet is good when you're tired, so I had some cream put on top too. It's delicious from a calorie perspective."

"One quick question. Is it delicious from a flavor perspective?"

"I don't like people who ask that kind of question."

Meanwhile, a few people were gathered by the wall near the giant pit.

"Okay, I've rigged it so cell phones can get out using this emergency phone's line. I can send my video camera footage too."

A young man in a lab coat looked up. He had removed the emergency phone from the wall and had attached some of its cords to his laptop and a wireless receiver.

"The Americans are jamming cell phones and other kinds of wireless signals up above, but now we're using the same line as them and can even tap into their communications."

"Try it out, Manager Kashima," said a girl in a white armored uniform behind him.

Kashima nodded toward the girl who carried a large white spear, pulled his cell phone from his pocket, and pressed the button.

A red light appeared on the wireless receiver, but it soon turned green.

"Good. It's getting through. …Natsu-san? Yes, I'm sorry, but I won't be able to make it home from work today. …Yes, I have to deal with some foreign guests. Tomorrow might be the same too. … You're going to my parents' place to help harvest the rice? Ha ha ha. You sure are a hard worker. …Yes, yes. No need to worry about the people glaring at me from behind. Bye."

"Kaku, you aren't allowed to turn into someone like him. Got it?"

"Don't worry, Chisato. I'll make sure I'm always right by your side."

“Yes, yes, yes.” Kazami gave a bitter smile and looked around. “Only Manager Kashima and Hiba, hm? Sibyl is being healed while Director Abram and Director Tsukuyomi are helping coordinate, right? We hurried back using the safe route through the disguised sewer, but there isn’t much for us to do.”

“That’s because we’re front line fighters. That more or less means we run combat-related errands. On the other hand, the others are specialists.”

Izumo’s comment brought Kazami’s gaze down to her right hand that held G-Sp2 which she had produced from a container on this floor. Izumo had similarly changed into an armored uniform and collected V-Sw. She then turned to Hiba.

“Why isn’t Mikage with you?”

His gaze, eyebrows, and shoulders all drooped.

“I went to school for my attendance and then came to UCAT for some target practice in the god of war. After that, Mikage-san said she was still tired because of the fight last night, so she went to take a nap.”

“So why aren’t you with her? And I thought the automatons had the nap room evacuated.”

“I went to the cafeteria to get her a light snack for when she woke up. Anyway, she has a way of sleeping in places other than the bed, much like a cat. It could be in the curtains or on the floor. My guess is she ended up under the bed and the automaton that checked on the room didn’t see her.”

“What a wild girl.”

“No, that’s just another thing that makes her so cute. Every morning I get to search around to see where she-… Why are you all walking away from me!?”

Kazami and Kashima exchanged glance and Kashima whispered with a frown.

“Seeing someone as young as him get so caught up in self-satisfaction is honestly kind of creepy.”

“Manager Kashima, this is a good time for you to look in a mirror, so wait for me to go get one. More importantly…”

Kazami placed her empty hand on her hip and looked up toward the dark ceiling.

“Is the barrier up above going to hold?”

“Some of the development department is in the attic area strengthening its defenses. They’re placing a few different kinds of conceptual barrier, so it’s really just a stalling method. And I’m not sure how long it will last if American UCAT goes all out. My best guess is we have about two days.”

“Two days?”

It was Izumo who answered that question with a cruel smile.

“Today, they’ll celebrate their successful takeover, but tomorrow, the other UCATs will ask them if they have the Concept Cores yet. They can fill tomorrow by saying they’re making preparations, but that excuse will be revealed as a lie if they don’t break in the day after that. That’s probably it.”

“Well, we’re here now, so I hope you can relax a little more,” said Kazami with a small smile.

…But we’re up against mechanical dragons in the double digits.

“This isn’t going to be easy.”

“Then we just have to bring out the third forms,” said Izumo.

She looked up at him and found him pointing at G-Sp2.

“Team Leviathan’s weapons were made to tear into dragons after all.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Kazami smiled at the message on G-Sp2’s LCD display.

“That’s right.”

Just as she nodded, Kashima spoke up while typing on his laptop.

“I’ve connected to the Nagasaki UCAT in Kyushu with that phone. We can speak with them now.”

“Can we contact Sayama?”

“Of course.”

He gave a slight smile and walked toward the containers with his video camera in one hand.

Kazami followed him and realized the floor was less level than she expected.

That was because a few thick guiderails were embedded in the floor.

Containers on pallets would be sent on those rails under computer control and taken by the lift on the wall to the arrival and departure zone to the side of the runway.

“So this is what G-Sp2 is always carried on.”

“It’s fun,” said the weapon.

Is it? she wondered with a tilt of the head.

“Now then,” said Kashima as he stopped ahead of her, turned around, and pulled out his cell phone. “Is this Sayama-kun? …I am glad to hear you managed to get some dinner. Can you see the video? Yes, the wireless receiver is broken and might cause some static, but can you see well enough? I’ll take that as a yes.”

Kazami raised a hand toward Kashima’s camera when he turned it toward her, but she viewed it as greeting Shinjou rather than Sayama.

“Manager Kashima, why did you move over here?”

“Because there is something I want to show you. It’s related to 5th-Gear.”

He turned toward the containers to his left.

Among them was a single object much larger than the containers.

“A dragon?”

“No. But it is forty-five meters long, so it would require eighteen of the rail lifts and need to be rotated vertically partway up.”

It looked like a long sword colored blue and white. It was sitting on a large pallet and it was indeed almost forty-five meters long, but it was not even ten meters tall. Some areas were higher than others, but it was overall about five meters tall. The tallest protrusion at the back was closer to seven meters.

It vaguely reminded Kazami of a generally sharp dragon lying down.

She then realized it was a fusion of two different objects.

“Is that a long cannon and a dragon stretching out?”

“The pallet has the name written on it: Vesper Cannon. This is my first time to see it, but it is apparently the weapon containing half of 5th-Gear’s Concept Core.”

Kazami gulped and Izumo and Hiba both stopped moving.

“Is this…?” began Hiba, but he did not continue.

After looking up at and across the giant cannon, Kazami realized no words were necessary.

…How do you use something so big? Not to mention…

The Vesper Cannon before her eyes was much larger than the one in the past Baku had shown her.

Just as she tilted her head in confusion, she heard a voice from the

darkness beyond the cannon.

"Now this is something I haven't seen in a while."

She recognized the voice.

"Doctor Chao?"

That who she saw on top of the Vesper Cannon.

"Why are you up there, Doctor Chao? Are you trying to show off?"

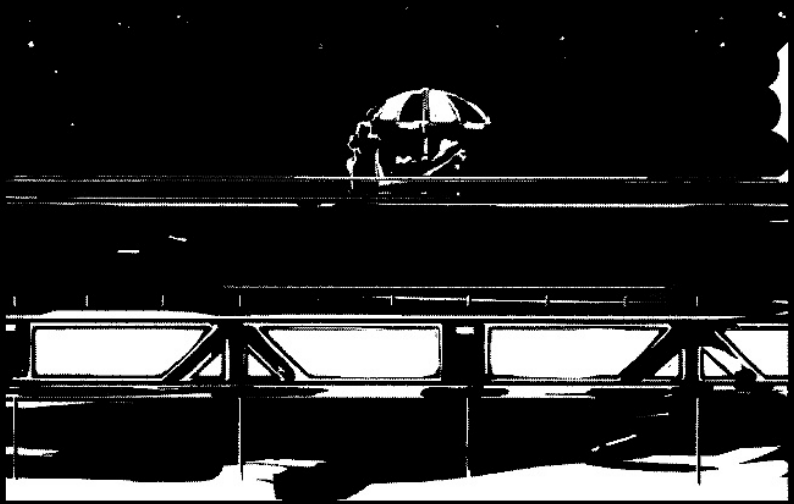
"Shut up. I've got a short break from work and you want to climb things to work off some stress at my age. More importantly, this is good timing to come across this thing."

She shrugged.

"I'm not exactly a replacement, but since that idiot Thunderson is dead, how about I tell you a bit about this. And since I'm not very nice, I'll leave out the best parts."

Chapter 14

“Shadow of Fate”



All things have aspects that cannot be seen
They cannot be seen by people
They cannot be seen by time

●

There were stars.

The night sky was an expanse of scattered stars visible through the night clouds floating in front of them.

Looking down showed a similar scene.

That scene was a city nightscape.

Both of those lights were visible from a certain spot in the mountains of Okutama in west Tokyo.

UCAT's disguised transport control building stood six stories aboveground, so the earth and sky were both visible from the roof's edge.

A man's voice could be heard before those lights.

"The lights on the surface look farther away to me. …How do they look to you, Sf?"

"Tes. It does not look that way at all to me. I have determined you are experiencing an optical illusion, Itaru-sama."

Even though it was night, a beach parasol and a long chair were located on the western edge of the roof. Ooshiro Itaru sat in the chair while wearing a black suit and he raised both hands after Sf spoke next to him.

"An optical illusion, is it? It's wonderful how accurate your mechanical decisions are."

"Tes. Unparalleled accuracy is the motto of the German UCAT automaton."

"Then prove your unparalleled accuracy by getting a headshot on the American UCAT soldiers guarding the roof entrance and wandering around down below. That should cause a commotion."

"Tes. Unfortunately, I do not possess a firearm. When we were taken into custody, I followed your advice and handed them over."

"Oh? Well, you can't exactly prove your unparalleled accuracy like this. I guess I can't see just how accurate German UCAT can be. How unfortunate."

"Tes," replied Sf with a bow.

She then reached into her pocket and pulled out a small object that resembled a watch.

"What is that, Sf?"

"Tes. It is the IAI boy's love pedometer named Manzou-kun."

“Is that all?”

“Tes. Do not worry. I have modified it so it is wirelessly linked to the explosives embedded in the firearms I handed over earlier. Once your daily number of steps reaches ten thousand, a transmission powerful enough to break through their jamming will send the detonation signal and demonstrate German UCAT’s accuracy. …I believe seven more steps are needed.”

“Wait, you stupid machine. Are you saying I can’t walk anymore today?”

“No, you can still walk. This simply means German UCAT’s accuracy will be demonstrated on the seventh step. And you may continue walking afterwards with no issue. The world will continue on just fine. Also, my predictions say you will shed tears of praise for me and send an email filled with deep emotion to German UCAT. Now, how about giving it a try?”

“I think you mean I’ll shed tears of grief and send an email of protest to German UCAT, you stupid machine.”

With that, Itaru sank down in the chair.

However, he continued looking at Sf.

As she stood next to him, she stared down below.

“American UCAT is camping on the runway,” he said. “As a German machine, does it look like an American occupation army to you?”

“They are not an army. I have determined UCATs are a type of vigilante organization.”

“Is that so, is that so? So vigilante organizations are giving automatons flashy guns and explosives these days.”

“Tes. That is standard equipment. If you wish for additional equipment, please send a request to German UCAT. A traffic safety firearm campaign is currently running, so the first one to enter will win the common weapon known as a personal anti-tank railgun.”

“The first one to enter? I’m pretty sure I’m the only one who could possibly enter.”

“No, there is one other. And that would be me. Surprised?”

“Oh, wow. How surprising. …Wait! Don’t tell me you entered!”

“No, it is unfortunately against the rules to enter into more than one contest.”

“I see, I see. That’s very good to hear. …What else did you

enter!?”

Sf tilted her head at his shouted question.

“Itaru-sama, your blood pressure is rising for some reason. I have determined you need to calm down. Also, I exist solely for you. I was created to not cause any trouble, interruption, unhappiness, interference, worries, or disrespect for you, so rest easy, breathe a sigh of relief, and feel grateful.”

“Then let me use all my self-control and gratitude to ask you this: how well do you think you have carried out that duty?”

“Tes. I have determined I will have done enough as long as I remain by your side. As long as I continue doing that, I will be fulfilling my raison d'être.”

“And if I don’t like it?”

“Tes. Earlier today, you corrected my words to this: they may complain, but they actually like you.”

“Wow. I must really, really love you.”

“Tes. I have recorded that statement in my brain’s storage space. Once this commotion is dealt with, I will send the audio data to German UCAT.”

“Don’t, you selfish machine.”

“Tes. I will not send out this data. It has been successfully saved in my storage space. Thank you for helping me expand my library of data.”

She gave a quick bow and he sighed.

She then looked down once more, but he could not see anything from his chair.

“Are you concerned about American UCAT? Or is it the pathetic ones hiding down below?”

“Tes. I have determined the Americans are more confusing by a margin of a few percentage points.”

“Out with it.”

Sf lowered her head slightly but did not change the direction of her gaze.

“Why did American UCAT occupy Japanese UCAT?”

“You already know the answer, don’t you?”

“Tes. Then let me give my guess. American UCAT’s main force seems to be their mechanical dragons, so I suspect they wish to carry out the Leviathan Road with 5th-Gear using those dragons.

They will negotiate through battle."

"And what is their motive?"

Sf moved her right hand in response. She accurately raised it to shoulder height and extended it such that her index finger pointed to the east.

"Tes. Their motive is likely the same as in that cemetery. It is the same imagination that leads humans to make graves."

"Is that so?" Itaru sat up in the chair and brushed a hand through his white hair. "You're more or less right there, as ridiculous as it is."

He reached for the metal cane leaning against the chair and tossed it to Sf.

She thrust out her left hand to catch the metal pole flying through the darkness. Without losing any momentum, she used her fingers and wrist to skillfully rotate the cane around like a windmill.

"Itaru-sama, here."

She placed it on the floor to the right of him.

The sharp sound of it striking the concrete caused the American UCAT soldiers guarding the roof to turn around. However, he took the cane regardless and stood from the chair.

"I don't know all the details myself, but let's try to increase your knowledge."

"Tes. Are you referring to the discussion about American UCAT?"

"Yes. I'm talking about why they are so fixated on 5th-Gear."

Just as Itaru took a step toward the edge of the roof, a young man's voice reached him from behind.

"Didn't someone tell us it was best to avoid revealing too much about the past?"

"Those were the words of the one who was always lecturing us, Roger Sully."

Itaru turned around and found a young man in a brown suit at the entrance to the roof. His blond hair was slicked back and he pushed his glasses up his nose.

"With Diana here too, this feels like a reunion. She is currently sleeping in the beauty salon, but for now I can speak with the Leviathan Road's supervisor about American UCAT's situation."

He walked forward and looked up in the sky.

"We can discuss the truth about the past that Mr. Richard

Thunderson revealed to us before leaving the United States.”

●

Sayama and Shinjou faced the transmission monitor in their hotel room.

The room was dark because the footage on the monitor was dark.

The monitor resembled a fourteen inch television and it was placed against the wall on a side table. The footage on its screen came from Kashima’s camera underneath UCAT.

A white and blue cannon was visible in the darkness.

Chao stood on top of it, so they could tell just how large it was. It was easily over forty meters.

From the top of the cannon, Chao spoke while walking toward the muzzle.

“Anyway, before the Allied UCAT arrived at the National Defense Department, they had captured a single mechanical dragon. Due to the Divine States-World Interaction Theory, the ley line modifications had connected 5th-Gear to Hokkaido. From what I heard, an airplane-like machine launched to Hokkaido’s northern coast was collected by Sayama Kaoru because he was free at the time.”

“My grandfather?”

Shinjou realized Sayama was holding his suit at the left side of his chest as he watched the monitor.

She sat to his left while wearing what she had worn to dinner.

Before leaving for the meal, her body had changed to Sadame’s about forty minutes later than usual.

That was why she wore girl’s clothing, but she pressed against Sayama’s left shoulder without worrying about the wrinkles it would make.

Just after the transmission had arrived, he had told the others what he had discussed with Roger.

American UCAT’s reason and foundation for stopping the Leviathan Road was the will that said all of Richard Thunderson’s authority transferred to American UCAT upon his death and that included full authority over 5th-Gear.

The others gulped in understanding of what that meant, but he had spoken up regardless.

“I will deal with it somehow. The Leviathan Road is mine, after all.”

The others had sworn to do whatever they could to help and he had nodded.

Currently, they were listening to Chao talk about the past.

“Back then, the National Defense Department – along with Siegfried’s research – was investigating the existence of the different Gears and how to produce the gates. After retrieving a mechanical dragon from a foreign Gear, they naturally attempted to analyze it, but they were unable to remove any of its components no matter how hard they tried and they were unable to restart it. Even when they climbed into the cockpit, the supposed controls did nothing. …Why do you think that was?”

Kazami spoke from outside the screen.

“Was it broken?”

“I said they captured it, didn’t I? It didn’t look broken and it indeed wasn’t.”

“Then,” said Shinjou while sensing Sayama turning toward her.

…Will my voice get through?

With that thought, she asked her question.

“Then was it out of fuel? Or was it not in the right concept?”

“Not quite, Shinjou. …That was Shinjou, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Doctor Chao.”

“I thought so. …From what Sayama told me, it was Shinjou who figured out why the machine wasn’t working despite not looking broken. Shinjou Kaname, that is.”

“Eh?”

That name caused Shinjou to shrink down.

…The Shinjou from the National Defense Department?

She tilted her head at the name that might or might not be related to her. Chao then arrived at the muzzle end and looked down from there.

“It was simple. The machine’s cockpit was empty when it fell from 5th-Gear, so Shinjou Kaname concluded that the machine was alive.” She took a breath. “He said the machine had put itself to sleep which kept any of the components from moving and rejected any input from the controls. And so he decided it needed to be returned to 5th-Gear.”

“Returned?”

“Yes. If it was indeed alive, their investigation was nothing more than searching over his body without his permission. That was why they tried to move the machine back to the crash site in Hokkaido.” Chao raised both her hands to shoulder height. “But when the machine opened the concept space gate, it connected to the scene of a concept battle between 5th-Gear and 9th-Gear. Sayama Kaoru, Siegfried, and the others there were caught up in the battle, but the machine suddenly began to move and it protected them.”

“Was that machine named Xolotl 3?”

“Oh? I’m impressed you know that. …The concept space closed and he was once more unable to return. But by that time, the National Defense Department had managed to replicate a weakened form of a few 5th-Gear concepts and language concepts, so Sayama Kaoru returned Xolotl 3 to the National Defense Department and attempted to speak with him.”

At that point, a left hand rose on the screen.

It was Hiba’s.

When he entered the screen, Shinjou spoke her honest thoughts.

“Oh, you were there, Ryuuji-kun?”

“Waaah! I guess I don’t stand out much compared to all these demonic upperclassmen, do I!?”

The sounds of someone cracking their knuckles came from the right of the screen and Hiba’s voice dropped in tone.

“Um,” he began. “I heard the National Defense Department discovered the Concept War when my grandfather and Siegfried-san were fighting over who destroyed a ley line modification facility. I believe corpses and wreckage from those defeated in a concept battle fell in front of them.”

“Yes, that’s right. What about it?”

“Well, does that mean the first actual contact with a resident of another Gear was with that mechanical dragon?”

Izumo clapped his hands together off screen.

“Yeah, that’s what I was going to say. Well said, Hiba. I think I’ll nickname you Mini-Me.”

“Ha ha ha. I don’t think so, Izumo-san. That would make it sound like I’m even remotely like you.”

“They’re a little alike. Kind of like Hiba-kun is the caterpillar and

Izumo-san is the butterfly. Right, Sayama-kun?"

"An excellent description, Shinjou-kun. That process is technically known as a metamorphosis and in this case it would be a perverted metamorphosis."

"Oh, so Ryuuji-kun is the pre-perversion Izumo-san and Izumo-san is the post-perversion Izumo-san?"

"Okay, you two! That's enough whispering commentary!"

Shinjou tilted her head at Hiba's shout.

…Perversion, hm?

She felt like a lot of things had started making sense.

"I have nothing more to say," she said. "I think we summed it up pretty well."

"I have a feeling you're making a rather large misunderstanding," replied Hiba with doubt in his eyes.

However, the next person to speak was not replying to him.

It was Sayama and his emotionless voice was directed at Chao in the slightly-staticky footage.

"Doctor Chao, that first contact did not initially go very well, did it?"

"Oh? How do you know that?"

"That is simple. When we visited Kanda before, we were shown the past at the guidance of a kind automaton. There, we saw Hiba-sensei, the Ooshiro father who is actually a decent person, and Cronus of 3rd-Gear."

Hiba turned toward him at the mention of his grandfather.

Shinjou noted the serious look in the boy's eyes while Sayama continued.

"They mentioned that Mikage-kun's birth gave Miss Rhea a desire to help Low-Gear and she had the mechanical dragon named Xolotl 3 open a path to 5th-Gear."

He reached out his left hand to the center of the screen and tapped the cannon with his index finger.

"He must have been wary of the National Defense Department."

"He was," replied Chao. "From what I hear, the mechanical dragon only gave the name Xolotl 3 and refused to say anything about 5th-Gear. I think that was in March of 1941. But when he was shown the god of war wreckage and other things they had retrieved, Xolotl 3 gave a few pieces of information and was shocked to find

Low-Gear knew nothing of the Concept War."

"And then along came Miss Rhea?"

"Yes," confirmed Chao. She sat on the muzzle end with her legs dangling down and her head resting on her arms. "That was in July of 1941. Mikage's conception was detected from Rhea's physical condition in July of the following year and that led her to contact Xolotl 3. I believe a group photo of the National Defense Department was taken around that time. Have you seen it? It would probably be pretty faded by now, though."

"Oh… Is that the one in the Kinugasa Library?" asked Shinjou.

"Yeah, if it exists, it'd be pretty old. There should be one of us in the old UCAT days as well. But anyway…"

"Yes?"

At Sayama's question, Chao pulled a cigarette from her pocket and placed it in her mouth.

"Four years before we arrived, the National Defense Department went farther than anyone else. It's a painful fact both for my home country and for the United States," she said. "Talking about this really takes me back. So much surprised me back then. I couldn't believe that Rhea's pregnancy lasted several years and there were plenty of ridiculous commotions after that as well. It's all so nostalgic."

●

The night sky was visible up above.

However, that vast expanse was cut off in every direction by trees.

This was a clearing surrounded by forest and two people stood there.

One was a short old man and the other was a tall old man.

The tall bald one spoke to the short one with a questioning tone in his voice.

"Has American UCAT finally made their move, Hiba Ryuutetsu? That country has a way of mistaking pride and reputation for justice and then obsessing over them."

"Don't say that, Siegfried. I know all too well how grudges and regret can put things in motion."

Near the forest to the west was a stump.

Ryuutetsu sat on that stump in pajamas and sandals and he looked up at Siegfried.

“Don’t you sit down too. Too old men sitting together like pals would be a little too creepy.”

“I have yet to age so much that I must sit,” replied Siegfried.

Ryuutetsu tilted his head and carefully observed Siegfried’s face from below as if looking up into the forest and sky.

“The hell did you just say? Do you want to settle what we started seventy years ago?”

“What are you talking about? That was precisely sixty-eight years ago and it was my win even if we never managed to finish.”

“I clearly had that one in the bag, you moron. And how can you even pretend to have won when my magnificent dropkick broke three of your ribs?”

“And whose left arm was it that my mystical spell literally smashed? And you were the one that wrongfully assumed I had destroyed that facility.”

“But you still destroyed all the other ones.”

“Being accurate in your work is an excellent German teaching. Also, that was not the real reason you were pursuing me. It went back to the day before. We were assigned to the same room, so I was cleaning and I found several indecent magazines below your bed.”

“Yeah,” agreed Ryuutetsu. “And of all the possible ways of handling that situation, you had to hand them over to Toshi. She ended up chasing me around with a red hot fire poker.”

“And in the end…”

“Yeah, I of course tricked her into thinking you had bought them as a way of assimilating Japanese culture. I was chasing you down that night to eliminate the witness.”

“You mountain ape. So does Toshi still think those magazines were mine?”

“Heh heh heh. You aren’t getting away tonight. I won’t let you reveal that misunderstanding after seventy years.”

“Get it into your head already. It was sixty-eight years ago.”

The two of them glared at each other and Siegfried slowly stepped back.

While still sitting, Ryuutetsu placed the bottoms of his feet on the

side of the stump so he could leap forward at any moment.

"…"

But they then heard a small whistle that resembled a sigh.

It was the wind producing a whistling noise as it struck something.

The two old men's expressions vanished for an instant and Siegfried eventually straightened up.

"Is that coming from Rhea's house?"

"It's falling apart a little, so the wind gets in. That reminds me of when Rhea's stomach grew so quickly. That was when we learned 3rd-Gear humans have long pregnancies to match their long lives, but they come to an end pretty damn quickly. Since they had so few descendants, Rhea didn't know how it worked either and it all caused a huge commotion. Chao was oddly excited."

"If that had happened in the summer, we might not have been able to stop the Allied UCATs. …And now we really weren't able to. It was Rhea who saved us back then."

Siegfried looked up.

The ceiling of trees shook lightly as the night breeze blew through like waves.

"This is a lot like that last night when Richard left for 5th-Gear."

"Yeah, I don't know much about that because I was busy with 3rd-Gear at the time. I hear he was pretty manly. When he heard another of his fellow pilots was shot down by Black Sun, didn't he ignore his orders to return to American UCAT and head out in Xolotl 3?"

"Yes, I'm starting to feel quite nostalgic. I'm almost ready to say he was a somewhat decent man. …I may be growing senile. In my memories, we were always all together back then. Even when I think about the National Defense Department, I picture Chao, Abram, and Richard with us and I begin to wonder if we were all together afterwards as well."

"I think that sometimes too. But while it may be senility in your case, I think some things really have changed. We had such trouble getting along with Thunderson back then, but now we can speak his name without issue."

Ryuutetsu stood up from the stump and looked up in the windy night sky just like Siegfried.

“And now he’s dead. I always thought I’d go before him.”

“And American UCAT is here too. It makes me wonder what happened to the resolution that sent him on his journey.”

“That idiot didn’t tell us anything.” Ryuutetsu bent his back and hips as if looking even further into the sky. “He didn’t leave us with anything besides the report saying 5th-Gear was a world of mechanical dragons, a simple history of the place, and that Vesper Cannon he brought back with him. He said something about searching for the other of his dead friend’s twin children, but he wouldn’t let any of us help.”

“Such ridiculous pride. He was supposedly American UCAT’s ace mechanical dragon pilot, but the pathetic man never properly flew one in front of us.”

“That’s right. That’s right.” Ryuutetsu smiled bitterly. “He was always second-guessing himself too. He even asked Lord Northwind why he was chosen to remain in Japan. And yet…”

“And yet?”

“While I was gone, the bastard destroyed 5th-Gear, sank Black Sun in the ocean off of Hokkaido, and returned with the Vesper Cannon that contained half the Concept Core.” Ryuutetsu straightened up. “If only Xolotl 3 was still around. Then we could learn about Thunderson even now and Thunderson might not have died in the first place.”

“Xolotl 3, hm? He’s gone now, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” said Ryuutetsu while looking up into the sky.

The wind blew in from the east and it brought noise with it.

That noise was the low rumbling of airplane engines.

The identification light of a transport plane was circling as if patrolling the night sky.

Hiba clicked his tongue while watching that flashing of red and white.

“Richard would only say Xolotl 3 and White Creation, which could oppose Black Sun, were both gone and that only the Vesper Cannon remained. But the Vesper Cannon I knew was Xolotl 3’s primary weapon and not that giant thing.” He took a breath. “5th-Gear mechanical dragons have the ability to self-evolve. That was in Thunderson’s report, so I’m guessing Xolotl 3 or some mechanical dragon we don’t know-…”

“Focused on White Creation by combining with the Vesper Cannon to one day defeat Black Sun?”

As Siegfried spoke, the rumbling passed by overhead.

The wind blew and rustled through the forest as if making some kind of appeal.

●

“And Black Sun, that large mechanical dragon singlehandedly spreading a storm of danger across 5th-Gear, has not been destroyed. Mr. Richard Thunderson received full authority over 5th-Gear from White Creation, but he was unable to fulfill his rematch with Black Sun.”

A night breeze blew across the roof while Roger spoke to the two standing before him.

Those two were Ooshiro Itaru and Sf, his maid.

“When Mr. Richard Thunderson was sent from American UCAT to Japanese UCAT, he stated in writing that all his authority would be transferred to American UCAT upon his death.”

“And so you claim the Vesper Cannon and 5th-Gear’s Concept Core belong to American UCAT? You say Japanese UCAT has kept the Vesper Cannon this long only because he left it here and we can’t begin the Leviathan Road without rechecking all this?”

Itaru asked his two questions in quick succession, but Roger did not immediately reply.

After a while, the wind blew in and he brushed a hand through his hair.

“More than sixty years ago, American UCAT lost some people to Black Sun.”

“And you prepared mechanical dragons to take vengeance?”

“That is not all, but I will still say testament. The Vesper Cannon is a mechanical dragon cannon, it is not known how to fire it, and it likely has a mind of its own. We predict that the Vesper Cannon evolved into its current form by combining with a mechanical dragon damaged in the battle that sank Black Sun.”

“And so Xolotl 3’s mind was taken into it?”

“Yes,” agreed Roger while reaching into his pocket and pulling out a postcard-sized piece of copy paper. “This is a photograph of Mr. Thunderson speaking with Xolotl 3. It is a reproduction of the

original. Supposedly, he and Xolotl 3 enjoyed speaking of flying and that was why he was placed in charge of 5th-Gear. If Xolotl 3's mind resides within the Vesper Cannon, it will respond to an American UCAT mechanical dragon that carries on Mr. Thunderson's wishes. Don't you agree?"

"That isn't all, is it?"

Itaru gave a bitter smile, raised the cane in his left hand and balanced himself on his left leg.

He rested the cane on his right shoulder so it pointed at the landscape behind him.

"Thunderson's great-granddaughter, Heo Thunderson, is somewhere out there. If the Vesper Cannon doesn't react to American UCAT, you're planning to put her in the mechanical dragon, aren't you?"

"There is no need and I would not allow it."

"Oh?"

Itaru lowered his cane and Roger pushed his glasses up his nose and returned the photograph to his pocket. Roger looked up at the transport ships visible flying beyond the wall of the concept space.

"A disguised transport ship is waiting in Yokota to take Miss Heo home at any time. It is possible she could be attacked by Black Sun while crossing the Pacific, so the Vesper Cannon can be used as bait and we have also prepared weakened 5th-Gear concepts. The latter have already been proven effective, so American UCAT will lure Black Sun here and settle this."

"Are you sure? Just because you have mechanical dragons doesn't mean-…"

"My colonel has already repelled Black Sun over the ocean once. All we need is to supply the finishing blow and that role will of course be filled by our mechanical dragons."

"Even with a fleet of American UCAT's latest mechanical dragons, this will lead to deaths."

"Yes," agreed Roger while lifting his glasses to hide his expression. "But this is the desire of our higher ups who wish to show off American UCAT's technology and strength. The colonel and I will form a defensive line at Yokota and the mechanical dragon unit will continue ahead to intercept it in Tokyo Bay. The pilots will all be volunteers who have said they will take care of it, so we can only

trust in them."

"I see," said Itaru before turning to Sf. "What do you think of all this?"

"Tes. It seems to me the invaders are simply attempting to take the world for themselves using war and the lives of the dead."

"Very good." Itaru turned to Roger. "What do you think of Diana's automaton, Roger?"

"I can only imagine she created it to mock us."

"It's quite a problem. Then again, I think she was trying to be considerate to those of us who survived that battle. Did she send anything to you?"

"Only the sand. After all, I was obedient and, unlike you, gained quite a lot back then. She did not need to provide any help after the fact."

At that point, he suddenly began walking toward the edge to look down.

"As for the one who isn't obedient…"

Roger crossed the roof, passed by Itaru, and arrived at the edge. He stood on the raised area meant to prevent anyone from jumping and lightly held up his body.

"What do you think? I am getting good at insinuating things, aren't I? This is a technique I picked up from that man. And-…"

He was unable to finish.

At some point, Sf had moved up behind him and she shoved his raised chest with both hands.

"Ah," he said.

"…"

As if in slow motion, he collapsed over the edge of the roof.

By the time the guards turned around in confusion, he had already vanished, so they had turned back, assuming nothing had happened.

The wind blew through and Itaru finally spoke.

"Explain what you just did, Sf."

"Tes. He stepped up and seemed to be hesitating, so my assistance circuits activated."

"Do you think anyone could escape that unharmed!?"

Sf tilted her head.

"Diana-sama was perfectly fine."

"Do not confuse strange Germans with strange Americans. They

have completely different special techniques."

Sf gave a brief and expressionless look up into the sky, but she soon lowered her head.

"Tes. I have committed that to memory. From now on, I will not help Americans in that manner. I am perfectly able to distinguish between races, so do not worry."

However, she then looked to the now-empty edge of the roof.

"I do not hear any words of thanks from Roger-sama."

"It may just be me, but I doubt you'll ever receive any from him now."

"Itaru-sama, may I send an email of complaint to American UCAT? 'I kindly shoved a representative of yours from the roof and was disappointed that he did not express any gratitude.' …How does that sound?"

"Do whatever you want, but don't get me involved."

As soon as he finished speaking, a hand reached onto the edge of the roof from the outside.

It scratched at the surface two or three times in search of something to grab onto.

Itaru sighed and spoke to Sf.

"Sf, help him."

"Tes."

Sf pulled a collapsible bamboo broom from her skirt and swept the hand away from the edge.

"Wah!" shouted Roger's voice.

"…"

Itaru and Sf watched as the voice travelled further and further down.

After several seconds had passed, Itaru finally spoke.

"Sf, what did you help him with?"

"Tes. I determined he was attempting to sweep the edge of the roof."

Sf looked to the edge but quickly tilted her head. She pulled a dust cloth from her apron and roughly wiped down the area his hand had been searching along.

"I have determined that was a truly amateurish job. Using your hand leaves fingerprints."

"You're attempting to eliminate the evidence of his struggle,

aren't you?"

Meanwhile, the door up to the roof was thrown open.

Roger stood in the doorway, but his outfit was a bit different. Specifically, his suit was torn as if by claws.

"Wh-what kind of knowledge did Diana give that automaton!?"

"Roger, I'm glad to see you're doing well. Let me tell you something interesting: I don't understand a thing about this automaton except that she is cruel to Americans and Russians."

"That witch is supposed to German, so why does she love lies and jokes so much?"

Roger walked swiftly over in his torn suit and Sf turned toward him and held out the slightly dirtied dust cloth.

"Roger-sama, I assisted your bravery and dealt with your poor attempt at cleaning, so I have determined it would best if you gave me some words of thanks."

Roger stopped in his tracks and stared at Itaru, but Itaru waved his hands back and forth.

"If you have anything to say, take it to Diana."

"Do you really think that witch will listen?"

Roger turned back toward Sf and pushed up the glasses that were now cracked on the right side.

"That could easily have turned into an international incident. You should be thankful that I survived."

Sf nodded at Roger's words.

"Tes. Then I will accept that our thanks have cancelled each other out. I suppose that is the American way."

She took a breath, looked up into the sky, shrugged her shoulders, and whistled.

"That American-style whistle means that my acceptance circuits have completed running. Will that suffice?"

●

"That pretty much covers it. Do you understand now, Shinjou, Sayama?"

Kazami watched as Chao stood up on the cannon.

When the woman turned around in her white coat and the sleeves flipped around, Shinjou's voice came from the cell phone Kashima held and the girl sounded rushed.

"D-Doctor Chao!"

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, as Doctor Chao, don't you think she should make some medicinal foods? Then we could 'Chao down' on-gwah!"

"C-c'mon, Sayama-kun. I want to ask something, so I made you quiet!"

"Shinjou, your phrasing at the end there was a little weird," commented Kazami.

Meanwhile, Chao's footsteps grew more distant, so Shinjou frantically spoke up.

"Wait a minute, Doctor Chao! I want to ask something! Um… Miss Chao!!"

Chao did not stop.

"That's not gonna cut it."

"Th-then Young Lady Chao!!"

"Keep going."

What is going on? wondered Kazami before turning toward Kashima.

"Shinjou, say what you have to say. It looks like Doctor Chao's test is pretty tough."

"U-um, then…"

Shinjou's hesitation ate up some of her time, but she finally asked.

"What happened to Shinjou Kaname!?"

Kazami looked toward the one being asked, but Chao did not stop walking away along the cannon.

However, she did speak quietly.

"Silly girl."

She sighed and slowed her exit a bit.

"When Shinjou Kaname was ill, my grandfather attempted to bring him to the people of 4th-Gear," said Sayama. "That was so 4th-Gear could heal him, but it never happened. Does that mean…"

"Are you trying to say Shinjou Kaname died of his illness? You fools," said Chao. "Before those like me arrived, Shinjou Kaname apparently quit the National Defense Department and was hospitalized in Hachioji. And there, he recovered."

"Eh? Then he never met 4th-Gear because his illness healed and there was no need?"

"I don't have the right to tell you about any of that, so ask

someone else. But let me tell you one thing. When I was there, a New Year's card arrived from Shinjou's home just once. The address was in Shimane and the card said his child had grown a good bit."

The word "child" caused Kazami to bring a hand to her own stomach.

Seeing that, Izumo gave her a serious look.

"What is it, Chisato? Are you getting fat? Or was that fried chicken you ate past its expira-…"

She decided a hook would be best to create silence, so she did so.

After the sound of flesh and bone collapsing to the ground, silence had fallen over the underground space.

She thought while finding the silence pleasant.

…Do Shinjou Kaname's descendants continue down to Shinjou?

The headquarters of IAI's predecessor, the Izumo Aviation Institute, had been located in Shimane. IAI headquarters were still there, so if Shinjou Kaname was from there…

…He was supposedly Professor Kinugasa's assistant, so they probably met at the Izumo HQ.

She then turned toward Kashima.

"Shinjou, you should visit the Shimane headquarters on your way back. You might find some kind of a hint."

"I think I will. They'll probably be busy, though."

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, you are such a wonderful person to worry about those underlings. And with future events in mind, I would like to search for information on Professor Kinugasa, so a visit to Shimane sounds perfect. Oh, and can I ask something of you, Kazami?"

"What is it, you idiot? Just get back to flirting and get to sleep. Those of us here still have to make plans for tomorrow."

"Very well," said the voice coming from Kashima's cell phone. "Kazami, I have a single request relating to Heo Thunderson."

"Eh?"

She frowned in displeasure when she wondered what he was going to ask. The others fell silent and she felt relief and trust in that.

"I have received some internal information that confirms Heo Thunderson is in Harakawa's apartment we visited today. Has

American UCAT managed to track her down yet?”

“No, it doesn’t seem so. And if that’s true…”

“Yes, secure her before they do. That would be the perfect bargaining chip.”

“You certainly are direct in your wording.”

“The easier to understand, the better. Also, get as much information on her as you can, even if you have to do some hacking to get it. There is something strange about her. Something about being demon possessed.”

“A demon? I’m not sure what that means, but I’ll have Sibyl look into it. I don’t like how American UCAT is doing things either.”

Kazami raised her eyebrows in a smile.

“I don’t know what kind of girl Heo Thunderson is, but I’m sure American UCAT intends to kindly shelter her…even if she’s actually a kitten that wants to head outside.”

“Very good. The opposite is also possible, but hurry either way. She is likely in that apartment even now. Wait to leave until the early morning when American UCAT lets their guard down and have someone keep an eye on her.”

“Sure.” Kazami nodded and raised the corner of her mouth. “Having something to do is just wonderful.”

Chapter 15

“Morning Commotion”

Where are you now?
Should I head in the direction of your voice?
In the direction of your resounding will?

●

In the early morning, the sun had yet to come out over the sea and the sky was a bluish-white covered by hazy clouds rather than a pure blue.

However, the dark ocean surface reflected the light of the sky and that lit surface seemed to rock a little.

The rising of the sea looked less like waves and more like short mountains. The peaks of those water mountains sent back the light of the sky while their feet were filled with a duller light.

A few forms were visible on that gentle rising and falling that resembled breathing.

They were boats.

The boats were not even a one-hundredth the size of the short mountains of the waves and they all had large lights hanging down from their masts.

They were fishing boats.

They all had a white base with blue and red lines decorating them. The sides of the colorful boats had the name of that particular boat as well as a license and license number from the association they belonged to. That association was the Sanriku Harbor Administration Bureau.

This was the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Sanriku.

Each of the boats traveling along the vast sea had two to five men or women onboard. They kept a certain distance between each other, their nets were already drawn in, and they all had their backs to the brightness of the sky as they moved west.

The horizon was visible ahead of them, but something white was visible above that line: clouds.

Those objects hanging in the sky were proof that land existed there.

Those boats that were small compared to the sea slowly travelled to the west. They would occasionally rock a bit as they created their own white waves.

The boats in the lead turned a bit to the north.

The sea off the coast of Sanriku had three currents.

The first was the Tsushima Current that came from the Sea of Japan and rotated clockwise along Honshu. It flowed north to south

and was the closest to the east coast of Honshu.

The second was the Chishima Current that flowed down from the south side of Hokkaido and to the east of Honshu. It travelled alongside the Tsushima Current as it too flowed north to south along Honshu's east coast.

The third was the Kuroshio that rotated in the Pacific Ocean. It flowed south to north further east of the previous two currents.

Those currents would change depending on season and time and they would display a variety of emotions, so the boats travelling on that ocean always chose the optimum time to cross those areas.

They were currently moving from the Chishima Current to the Tsushima Current.

A few of them began to scatter to one side or the other. These boats chose to fish on the transition line between currents during the early morning because that was when the fish deep in the water began to move.

The boats wishing to return to port early had gathered together and started to leave.

But at that point, a sound resembling an alarm or a whistle filled the sky. It was a boat's horn.

However, that ear-splitting sound did not come from the leaving boats.

It came from the ones that still had their nets out in between the currents.

At first, only a few boats sounded their horns, but several more did the same after noticing something and even more of the sounds filled the air a moment later.

A crewmember of one boat hurrying home grabbed the radio on the cramped shed-like bridge.

"What happened!?"

"Look in the water!"

Hearing that, everyone activated the fishfinders attached to their boats.

The rotating green light on the sonar screen displayed what was hidden within the ocean.

It picked up on something.

Something that filled the entire sonar screen.

"…!?"

This was not a school of fish or a ship.

The sonar searched over an area of several hundred meters, so the crewmembers initially thought it was malfunctioning.

However, all of the ships were seeing the same thing.

This should not have been possible.

There was no way something that large was moving through the ocean, so they had no idea what was going on.

But then something else happened.

All of those watching the sonar noticed the light had vanished from the screen.

Or rather, in the time it took for the sonar to make a full rotation, the light moved outside the sonar's range.

It moved forward in the ocean in an instant.

A great sound came from the ocean as something moved swiftly through the water. The moving object's presence had created a large gap in the water and its quick movement opened a great pit or abyss.

All of those on the boats saw a ravine open in the ocean.

It was about fifty meters wide and one hundred meters deep and they could not tell how long it was.

Soon thereafter, the ocean exploded.

Air flowed into the ravine and the collapsing water pressing down on it caused an explosion of air.

"!!"

The great blast created a water pillar so large it looked like a wall of water rising above the morning ocean. The white surging wall was over two hundred meters tall, the seemingly unshakable ocean below it trembled, and the ravine split like an opening mouth.

The boats desperately brought themselves alongside the collapsing ocean and watched the trembling of the sea.

Some boats were struck by the waterfalls created when the pillar of water fell back down, some sank into the giant air pockets rising from within the water, and others were rendered completely uncontrollable thanks to those air pockets bursting.

Among it all, a crewmember saw something as his ship rose to the top of a mountainous wave. The ocean now resembled a mountain range, a great mist of seawater filled the air, and the long depression of the sea being split was travelling quickly into the

distance.

“————”

He heard a sound in the sky that he should never have heard on the ocean: a roar that resembled creaking metal.

He could not see anything, but all of the crewmembers looked in the direction of that roar that almost sounded like weeping and the moving ocean ravine.

That direction was south and it would lead to the ocean off of Kantou.

At some point, the sun had risen and it pointed in that same direction.

●

A shadow descended in front of the round morning sun.

From the front, it looked long horizontally.

It was a large airplane.

The thick green craft emitted shimmering heat behind the wings as it began to land.

The sound of the rubber tires tearing into the ground overlapped with the sound of the fully open flaps beating at the air.

Some people moved along the runway while backed by those sounds and the sound of the morning wind. A truck to be loaded with materials approached the arriving transport plane.

All of that activity was visible from in front of the white transportation building at the far end of the runway.

American UCAT guards stood in the large entrance that contained a flower bed and a small roundabout filled with the morning sunlight.

On all their backs were submachine guns modified for concept combat.

Those out on patrol raised a hand in greeting to those at the front entrance who then went out for their patrol.

However, something disturbed their movements.

Someone had appeared from the mountain path on the side of the building opposite the runway.

That woman soon arrived from the other side of the transport control building.

She wore a black T-shirt and black bike shorts, her gray hair

fluttered behind her, and she ran with a light step.

"Oh, good morning."

She raised a hand in greeting when she noticed the guards. Just in front of the roundabout seemed to be her end point because her black basketball shoes dug into the sand there, but she continued jogging in place while catching her breath.

One of the guards frowned until he noticed the emblem sewn to her T-shirt's shoulder. The pattern showed a land reconnected after being split between left and right.

"Are you German UCAT Inspector Diana Zonburg?"

"Yes, but at the moment I am intruding her where American UCAT has taken residence."

"I thought you were forbidden to leave the building."

"I thought you were merely protecting me as a member of German UCAT."

With that, Diana stopped jogging in place.

She lightly clasped her hands and thrust the palms forward while looking to the entrance beyond the guard who was narrowing his eyes.

"Isn't that right, Roger?"

"No matter how I answer, it would cause problems with German UCAT," answered a man in a suit who stepped out of the automatic door.

It was Roger. The morning sun washed over his brown suit as he waved toward the surrounding guards. They took that as a sign to return to their posts and patrols.

Roger sighed and walked over to Diana.

"I am sorry, Diana, but could you try not to interfere with the others?"

"Oh? Since when can you order me around, Roger? I hold the rank of colonel, you know?"

"You were a major ten years ago, weren't you?"

"And weren't you a second lieutenant? Were you promoted? Wait. I think I heard you are a captain now."

"My authority was raised before I was sent here, so I am now a major."

"Hm," muttered Diana as she wiped her forehead with the white towel on her shoulder. "Did you meet Itaru?"

“I was thrown from the roof.”

“Yes, he can be a bit aggressive.”

“It was the automaton you built that did it!!”

After a short pause, she tilted her head and frowned toward Roger.

“You don’t have to shout. I can hear you just fine.”

“…”

He bent back and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes, quietly told himself to calm down, and took another deep breath.

Once he opened his eyes, he found Diana also taking deep breaths and smiling.

“The morning air really is wonderful, isn’t it? What do you think of the Okutama region’s air? Is it helping calm down your usually strict and impatient mind?”

“Are you scattering bait so you can challenge me to a war of words?”

“Why would I ever do that? There’s no way you could possibly defeat me.”

She smiled and waved a hand in denial and he subconsciously tightened his tie. Too much strength gathered in his fingertips, so he once more told himself to calm down.

“I have dedicated a lot of time to studying arguments in the past ten years.”

“That must have been a lot of work and I’m sure there were better ways to spend your time. Like crying yourself to sleep.”

“Do not be ridiculous. Americans do not allow themselves to surrender.”

“Does that silly pride come from consuming nothing but burgers and cola? It must be the excess sugar and cholesterol reaching your brains.”

Diana brought a hand to her cheek and lowered her shoulders in a sigh.

“Poor, poor Roger.”

“Why you-…”

Diana’s expression changed when she heard those words slip out.

She gave a bitter laugh.

●

As the laugh escaped her throat and her shoulders shook, Diana turned her back on Roger.

“I see you haven’t changed. But I no longer have it in me to keep this up.”

“You seem quite willing to me.”

“I can’t do it,” she said while wiping tears from her eyes, turning around, and looking up in the sky. “Not now that there is no longer anyone to stop me.”

Roger could not immediately respond to that comment and he briefly paused to breathe in the morning air of Okutama.

“I suppose not.”

“Anyway, I hear you met the Sayama boy over a video call. Fun, wasn’t he? If you had met him earlier, you would have stopped the attack on Japanese UCAT, wouldn’t you have? You would have thought that strange boy could reach the place we failed to.”

“Well…”

Diana walked off without saying anything more. She made her way to the vending machine at the end of the roundabout and in front of the white building.

Roger followed and the rumbling of another transport plane arrived in the eastern sky. However, he heard the woman speak over that rumbling.

“American UCAT is attempting to stop the Leviathan Road in order to supervise the future of the world in the name of the United States. However, we know the truth,” said Diana. “We are the only ones that know that American UCAT cannot complete the Leviathan Road. Did you tell your superiors that?” She stopped in front of the vending machine. “The survivors of those who once assisted Japanese UCAT decided to hide this truth, but did you tell your superiors who know nothing?”

“No. How could I possibly tell them something so ridiculous,” replied Roger with a shake of his head. “I have not informed American UCAT of what happened.”

“Why not? About fifteen years ago, we began helping Japanese UCAT due to a variety of obligations and happenstances. Even back then, you could have informed American UCAT of what we learned, so why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t you with German UCAT?” asked Roger in front of the

vending machine.

However, he received no response, so he took in a breath and turned toward her.

“Diana, can you guess what Itaru is thinking now? He clearly intends to bear it all himself. He will not even inform the Sayama boy and the others you support and he will have that truth destroyed along with him. …Do you see it that way as well?”

However, she once more did not reply.

She simply pointed at the vending machine with a smile and tapped at one of the sample drink cans.

“How about you make up for a few of your losses from ten years ago?”

Roger’s shoulders drooped when he heard that.

He reluctantly pulled out his wallet and placed some change in the machine. After he heard the money fall, he pressed the button, and Diana quietly thanked him in German and pulled out the can.

“You always drink coffee after exercising, don’t you?” he said.

“Oh? This is IAI’s sports drink coffee.”

She opened the pull-tab, took a drink, and continued.

“But you know what? Director Abram and Doctor Chao were held in reserve back then, so they barely know anything. The only ones who learned the truth were Sayama Kaoru and those trusted by Sayama Asagi.”

“But most of those people died during the Great Kansai Earthquake and UCAT eliminated all of the records while disguising it as conflict within IAI. How do you feel about all that as the single survivor of the Five Great Peaks?”

“Those times were a lot of fun,” she said slowly while looking at the sky and forest displayed on the vending machine’s plastic board and the actual city visible in the distance. “A witch who hated being compared to her uncle’s achievements decided to go to the same place her uncle had. There, the witch was delighted to have people recognize her strength. She met others there who had their own strengths and they had a lot of fun together.”

She gave a quiet laugh.

“The place where I got drunk and hit UCAT Director Ooshiro with the bottle is now a vegetable garden, but the flowers and trees we all planted still exist.”

"Do you intend to continue with those festive days?"

"No," she replied with a smile and tilt of the head. "I have already retired. All I will do is provide support for those who wish to follow in our footsteps. But…it's kind of funny. Georgius is now responding to the Sayama boy."

"…"

"And yet it did not provide us with anything. When Yume first showed me that device which *you-know-who* created for some reason, I wondered if it was simply a failure. However, it truly is lending its power to the Sayama boy." She laughed again. "Yume and the rest of us weren't able to find the right half of Georgius, but I wonder if they will be able to."

"They?"

"The Sayama boy and his friends. Just as with the Eight Great Dragon Kings and the Five Great Peaks, he is not alone. I believe they will gather both parts of Georgius, bring the ten Concept Cores to their side, and guide the world beyond the Leviathan Road just as Yume said."

She lowered her gaze just a bit.

"I believe they will do what we could not."

With that, she walked past the vending machine and to the trashcan there.

"Diana, isn't it a little rude to me if you throw it away without finishing it?"

"Oh? But I did finish it."

She turned her upper body around and shook the can. It showed no sign of weight.

"But you only took one drink."

"I am jogging for my looks. I already have a decent lung capacity."

"Let me be clear about one thing, Diana. You are the worst sort of human being."

"Wh-why would you say that?"

Just as she threw away the can, the main entrance to their right opened and a slender elderly man in a suit walked out.

"Roger! Roger! A mysterious form has been detected in the ocean east of this country!"

"Testament. Colonel Odor, I already knew that. The information

gathered by the Japanese Self-Defense Force and our satellites shows an abnormality in the ocean currents. Russia has detected it as well, but they have not sent out their military or UCAT."

"Roger, Roger. Do you mean…"

"It is likely Black Sun. This is no more than conjecture at this point, but I believe it is slowly travelling toward Tokyo after healing itself at the bottom of the northern ocean after its injuries the other night. It is likely cautious of the surface and enjoying the evolution brought on by the high water pressure. But once it closes in on the Vesper Cannon it desires, it will quickly travel along the surface or fly through the sky."

"Hm." Odor stopped at the step down at the edge of the entrance and crossed his arms. "Roger, Roger. How will we prevent it from reaching land?"

"Testament. The mechanical dragon unit has already been divided into teams on the coast of Tokyo Bay."

"Such brave, brave young pilots. If it were not for the orders of the higher ups, I would travel to the front lines to support them. You should learn from their example, Roger. Got that?"

"We can visit them later. I am sure a visit from their overall commander will delight them and your power will be necessary in the middle stage if they do lose," said Roger. "Also, we need to capture Black Sun in an Accel Point so we do not disturb the people of the city. That Accel Point will need to be large, but I believe Japanese UCAT's Kanda Laboratory is researching a device to create one that covers all of Tokyo."

"Will we… Will we be taking that from them?"

"No." Roger shook his head and pushed his glasses up his nose. "The Kanda Laboratory has already been sent the information on Black Sun's approach. To protect their own country, the laboratory has no choice but to create the Accel Point whether we ask them to or not. We will merely accept their cooperation in this matter."

"I see. I see, Roger. But I have another odd piece of information."

Roger frowned at that and he took a step toward Odor while asking what it was.

"The enemy. The enemy is on the move. We detected movement not far below ground here. The search team said the movement had arrived here about ten seconds ago."

“Is it Japanese UCAT?”

Roger tilted his head and twisted his body to look along the ground, but he saw nothing.

It was then that Diana noticed Odor after finishing throwing away her can and taking a breath.

“Oh?” she said in slight surprise. “I thought I recognized that way of speaking. Are you the commander here, honey?”

Roger froze in place when he heard Diana’s final word.

He looked first at Odor and then at Diana.

“Honey?”

“Yes, Roger. Before you were put under his command, we were married on paper.”

“Then when the colonel mentioned his wife, he meant…”

“That’s right. He meant me. We have yet to even kiss, though.”

Diana brought her right hand to her cheek and smiled as she spoke.

“Ehhhhhhh!?”

Voices erupted from below the ground and a manhole cover on the road behind her blasted straight up into the sky. Two heads rose from the hole after headbutting the metal lid out of the way.

The large one looked to the small one.

“D-did you hear that, Hiba!? I thought she was a well-endowed foreigner, but she was actually a well-endowed untouched foreigner wife! I don’t think I’ve ever been this overcome by shock before, but is that okay!? If so, tell me it’s not okay!”

“Yes, it’s not okay, Izumo-san! You can’t let the shock distract you here!”

“You calm down too, Hiba! If you can’t calm down, how am I supposed to!?”

“Can’t you get Kazami-san to climb up and punch you?”

“Whelp, that thought calmed me down in a hurry. …But that was one hell of a surprising and wondrous announcement! It’s already reigniting my thoughts!”

“I’m just as surprised as you, Izumo-san! Who would’ve thought there was such a novel new genre so close by!? I’m so glad I joined UCAT. It’s so full of stimulation.”

“Don’t cry, Hiba. This *is* pretty amazing, though. It’s got a good bit of impact from how unexpected it was too. Still, if the genres are spread out too much, it loses any real focus. Commentator Hiba, do you agree with that assessment of Diana’s attack? What do you have to say as someone active in this field?”

“Well, ignoring the lack of focus, it might be difficult for me personally. I’m not sure I see how the genre of wives can be applied to Mikage-san. But the well-endowed angle is on a direct course high on the inside corner and I think Mikage-san might even be heading in that direction. I’d like for Diana to stay focused and try harder next time.”

“An excellent point, Commentator Hiba. But we really are idiots.

Wa ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Yeah, we really are. Hah hah hah hah!”

The two laughed and laughed until finally looking toward Roger and growing serious.

“Crap!!”

They pulled their heads back into the hole and the manhole cover fell from the sky to loudly fill it once more.

At the same time, Odor shouted out.

“Roger! Roger! These are a busy bunch! Do something about it!”

●

Shinjou stood in the morning light.

The first thing she noticed was the sky overhead.

It was blue and clear, but the color of the sun reminded her of summer.

“Huh?”

She then realized she had no body.

Um, she thought just before realizing what had happened. She had yet to wake up after going to sleep the previous night.

That meant she was seeing the past in a dream while dozing in the morning.

…I need to get up early today, but if Baku is doing this, what summer am I seeing?

She looked up into the sky and finally noticed something odd. What resembled clouds was rising up to join the actual clouds in the sky.

“…?”

She mentally tilted her head and looked back down.

There, she saw ruins.

“Eh?”

What had once been a city lay before her.

The “clouds” rising from below were pillars of smoke rising from the ruins.

She quickly looked around and only learned that the ruins extended in every direction around her.

She currently stood on a large road that had been burned away. It was a two-lane road and all that remained of the buildings on either side were walls rising only about two stories high. However,

even those walls had been colored white and a scorched black color covered them as if something had spilled across them.

All of the buildings had lost their roofs and walls and there was no glass in any of the windows.

The internal structures of the buildings was scattered from the buildings to the road as if they had been spat out.

An arcade had originally covered the road and a structure with a Go board pattern was still visible, but it had all crumbled and burned.

…It's already over.

She realized this was the aftermath of an air raid.

She heard a fire alarm in the distance and felt the wind.

This was the cool west wind that occasionally caressed her on summer mornings.

That was when she noticed there were people there.

They were bent over and searching through the rubble on the road or inside the burnt buildings.

Some people carried wood and sandbags in a bicycle trailer and others went around calling the names of families or informing others that survivors were being registered at the local shelter.

All of them were dressed in the slightly old attire Shinjou had seen in history textbooks.

…This is during World War Two.

She remembered seeing the Firebombing of Tokyo while out in Shinjuku back when they had been investigating 2nd-Gear.

"Is this after that?"

With that question in mind, she ran down the road.

On the way, she avoided and passed by a housewife pulling a bicycle trailer carrying a child and a futon.

She was trying to find some way of identifying the location.

The traffic lights were melted and broken and all the shop signs were burned.

"——————"

Her vision suddenly opened up and a sort of plaza appeared to the left of the arcade.

It was a large space surrounded by a cement wall and it contained burnt trees and a large building that sat at the center of them.

It was a two-story wooden building about one hundred meters

across, but even it had lost its roof and been crushed as if punched from above. She also saw scorch marks all over its surface.

…Is that a school? The attack must have been completely indiscriminate.

As she thought that, Shinjou moved her vision toward the plaza's entrance.

However, that entrance was filled with people. A closer look showed the entrance was sealed by a metal gate.

The people were approaching the gate and Shinjou heard voices. The people were all insistently and repeatedly calling out different names.

"…?"

She further approached in confusion and saw an old soldier in the center of a ring of people. He looked at a paper in his hand with glasses missing one of its lenses.

And he spoke.

"I will be reading off the names now, so quiet down!"

That caused Shinjou to mentally frown.

…Is it a list of people they're looking for?

The old soldier began reading names and they were all paired with a location such as a plaza, a Buddhist temple, or a Shinto shrine. That clued Shinjou in.

"He's telling them where evacuated people ended up."

So that's it, she thought with a sigh of relief. *Any name read here is someone who was evacuated in time.*

Each time a name was read, she saw someone give their thanks and leave the circle of people.

…Thank goodness.

She looked to the plaza and wondered if the school had been a shelter for evacuees.

A moment later, she noticed some writing.

The gate into the plaza had a metal doorplate and the name there told her the building had not been a school.

"First Hachioji Hospital."

As she muttered those words in her heart, she looked up in a daze.

She looked at the burned down building, looked back at the doorplate, and finally recalled a certain fact.

…That was where Shinjou Kaname was hospitalized!

She felt as if her mind had suddenly jumped up. Before she realized it was her racing pulse, she brought her vision into the circle of people and listened to the list of names being read.

However, she only heard other names, so…

"Shinjou! What happened to Shinjou Kaname!?"

She looked at the burned building and the paper in the old soldier's hand, but her voice could not reach him as this was nothing but a replaying of the past.

…All I can do is watch!

She held her breath within the circle of people, but she could not stand it any longer and took a step back to leave.

But at that very moment, she heard a dignified male voice from behind her.

"Shinjou! Is there a Shinjou Kaname on that list!?"

…Sayama-kun!?

She frantically turned around toward that sharp tone of voice. She wondered if Baku's abilities had grown and the creature's owner had entered the past with her.

But that was not the case.

A blue truck loaded with wooden boxes that appeared to hold food was stopped in the road. It was dented in places, covered with mud, and the words "Izumo Co." were partially missing.

A young man impeccably wearing a dirty military uniform stepped out of the truck.

"I apologize to the rest of you, but I am Lieutenant Sayama Kaoru. A man with special military duty was hospitalized here. If possible, I would like to know where he ended up."

Shinjou was left speechless.

…That's Sayama-kun's grandfather?

The young man approached along the road and his footsteps brought sharp facial features, cheeks with slight facial hair, and a powerful expression into view.

He had a glare in his eyes, but she could not tell if that was normal or due to the situation.

…That's different from Sayama-kun's usual expressionless look.

However, the way the man moved and spoke resembled him and she came to an odd sense of understanding. She also wondered if

Sayama was holding his chest even without a body if he was seeing this as well.

…I'm sorry, but I can't support you right now.

But while she thought that, Sayama Kaoru passed by her and spoke.

"Do you know where Warrant Officer Shinjou Kaname is?"

The old soldier frowned.

"There is an order to-…"

"Then I shall wait," readily replied Sayama Kaoru while crossing his arms. "Is it in iroha order?"

Shinjou looked up at him feeling a bit disappointed, but she saw something unexpected there: his expression and attitude.

Strength had not left his gaze and his fists were clenched despite crossing his arms. And they were clenched tightly.

…He's really impatient.

Meanwhile, he spoke to the old soldier with no concern in his voice.

"Those waiting for someone at the end of the list can unload the truck. These are private reserves. And you can distribute them. I can trust you."

The old soldier nodded and began reading the names once more.

While listening to the names, Shinjou mouthed the iroha order. The name Shinjou would be toward the end.

Nevertheless, Sayama Kaoru waited. Even as he looked back to check on the other waiting people unloading the truck, he silently waited for the name to be called.

And Shinjou also waited. If the name Shinjou Kaname was not called…

…It means he died.

"Shinjou Kaname."

Suddenly, the old soldier's voice rang out and Sayama Kaoru's head sprang up.

However, he levelled his gaze once more and spoke quietly.

"Where is he?"

The soldier gave the name of a Buddhist temple. And…

"All the patients in Building 3 were apparently transported by truck before the air raid last night. The truck turned back to take those in the maternity department, but it didn't arrive in time and…"

The soldier trailed off as he realized he was growing sidetracked and he bowed his head.

Sayama Kaoru replied by partially closing his eyes and nodding back.

“I do not mind. Any regrets you speak will rise into the sky with the smoke as part of their funeral. It is not my place to say so, but I do not want you to suffer by hiding so much within yourself.”

“Then I will keep those words in my heart instead. If you need a guide to the evacuation spot…”

“Thank you, but I know the way.”

He then turned around, but he stopped in front of the truck. There were still boxes in the back, so he turned back around and spoke to the people.

“Do you not want these?”

“We have taken as much as we need. Take the rest to the people at your destination.”

Sayama Kaoru simply nodded in response to the old soldier’s words and he slowly climbed into the truck.

He saluted from within the window and started up the truck.

Shinjou knew his destination.

…He’s going to where Shinjou Kaname is.

At that point, her vision went dark.

The past was ending. As she felt herself sinking, she saw the truck driving away.

…How does it turn out?

“Is the person at his destination my blood relative?”

…I’m glad Shinjou Kaname was evacuated.

She then had a thought about the dream itself.

…Why did Baku give me this dream?

Baku always showed them the past when it had some connection to them.

“So is this connected to where we’re going?”

Their plan for the day was to visit the 4th-Gear reservation.

Sayama was likely having the same dream and she decided to ask him about it after they woke and dressed.

…What was that about?

And…

…What are the others from UCAT doing?

With that thought, her vision fully fell into the darkness.

●

A dark tunnel was illuminated only by the white emergency lights installed every few dozen meters and it had water running down the center rather than a road.

This was a sewer. The water visible below the lights was filthy, but it was indeed flowing. And the insufficient light showed something reflected in that water's surface.

The reflection was of three people travelling along the pathway on the left side of the sewer. One was a short boy, one was a tall boy, and the last was a girl of average height. They all wore school uniforms, but the tall boy carried a giant white sword in his left hand and the girl held a long white spear in her right hand.

They were running away from something and the girl in the back spoke first.

"C'mon, you two! We need to get to Harakawa's house, so don't disappear on me and then get spotted!"

"W-wait, Chisato! We can talk this out! Any guy would understand!! Right, Hiba!?"

"H-he's right, Kazami-san! Any guy would understand! …Okay, this is when you're supposed to give the punch line about not being a guy!"

Suddenly, a white beam of light raced through the sewer.

She had fired G-Sp2.

Izumo and Hiba frantically ducked down while still running.

The light passed over their heads and they soon heard it hit far ahead of them.

"Y-you idiot!" shouted Izumo. "That kind of punch line could've killed me! What if I'd died!?"

"What's this, Kaku? Have you become such a hopeless man that you talk about reality in what-ifs?"

Three additional shots flew their way, so the boys in the lead pressed against the wall and jumped to avoid them.

"Ha ha ha. These are surprisingly easy to avoid!"

"They really are, Izumo-san!"

"Maybe, but next time I'll actually aim using the sight."

"You were firing randomly!?"

"Um," began Hiba as he ran. "I think Mikage-san would be sad if I died! And Sibyl-san would hold a grudge!"

"That sounds unpleasant, heartbreaking, and hard to endure…but I think we could find a way to put it behind us."

"Waaah! I much prefer continuing to enjoy the moment! Is that really not an option!?"

Another shot flew toward him, but the light was worn down and deflected just before it hit.

"Izumo-san!"

Izumo had smashed G-Sp2's shot with V-Sw.

"Th-thank you so much, Izumo-san! As thanks, I'll give you the collection of internet bookmarks I have on my computer!"

"…"

"Wh-why are you thinking while you run, Izumo-san?"

"Well," he began while tilting his head. "I realized covering for a guy isn't all that enjoyable. Chisato, I won't block the next one, so go for it."

"Oh, god! This couple really is wonderfully awful!"

"Just get running, you targets. This is a pretty long straightaway."

Kazami's voice motivated the leading boys to run even faster with perfectly serious expressions. Hiba moved ahead as he slipped through the emergency lighting with a lighter step than Izumo.

"Does this long sewer pass underneath the runway?"

"No. According to the military god papa, it runs underground alongside the runway. You saw directly underneath the runway last night, remember? It was that weird pit next to that container room."

"What was that pit? Isn't it supposed to be about three kilometers long and a hundred meters wide?"

"How should I know? It's sealed at the bottom and the military god papa only said it isn't meant as space for a future expansion to the underground facilities. …Well, maybe they'll build an arcade or bowling alley there."

"Are the two of you not going to dodge anymore?"

The voice from behind them was filled with murderous intent.

But just as Hiba and Izumo lowered their speed because of that, a secondary sewer flowed into the main one on the right. Hiba, Izumo, and Kazami were running along the inspection passageway on the

left, so they immediately passed by the intersection with the secondary sewer.

But just as they did, light reached them from that secondary sewer.

The light was narrow but bright and there were several distinct beams of it.

“——————!?”

They heard English and Kazami shouted out.

“They’ve found us!”

At the same time, they heard another voice.

- **—Light possesses power.**

Those words tore into the world and the color white raced along the narrow passageway.

Wings of light had spread from Kazami’s back and they stretched almost to the ceiling in an instant.

“Now, then.”

The flapping of those wings overcame the darkness and she flew as if throwing herself forward.

The tips of the wings tore into the arched ceiling and they instantly and audibly flew down to the point that they tore into the water’s surface below. That produced swift forward motion using her power of flight.

It looked like she was using her wings to claw up the narrow passageway walls, but she actually moved forward with great speed.

She flew and quickly overtook Izumo and Hiba.

“Chisato!” shouted Izumo as he ran. “Stand out that much and they’ll target you from behind!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll reach the other end and leave in no time.”

A wall was located about fifty meters ahead and the sewer split to the left and right there.

“Head right there and you’re out. It won’t even take me thirty seconds with my wings.”

As she spoke, shouts in English reached them from behind.

“Izumo-san, am I the only one hearing something bouncing off the walls?”

“No, and I’ve been hearing bursting gunpowder for a while now.”

“Ha ha ha. You have good ears, Izumo-san. …Wait! We’re being shot at!? Ah, Kazami-san is leaving us behind!”

“Don’t say it like that. It makes me sound bad. I’m just going on ahead.”

Izumo shouted toward Kazami’s voice and wings of light that were already growing distant.

“Hey, Chisato! What if I collapse from these invaders’ bullets!?”

“Nn, sorry. I just don’t think this is enough to kill you.”

“I-it’ll kill me!”

Kazami thought for a moment about Hiba’s protest, but she flapped her wings again and continued forward.

“Nn, sorry. Give me a little more time to think about that one.”

“Well, don’t you love taking things slow. …Ah! That one grazed my ear! My ear!”

As Hiba complained, more English shouts and gunshots pursued them.

Kazami quickly reached the wall, flapped her wings, and vanished to the right.

As soon as darkness returned to the passageway, Izumo rushed his body onward and came up alongside Hiba.

“Hiba, this is a cliché line, so listen carefully: Go on ahead and leave the rest to your comrade! …I’m talking to myself, of course.”

“Ha ha ha. Don’t be silly, Izumo-san. It’s normally the big tough one that dies.”

“Do the Taka-Akita Student Council or UCAT seem at all normal to you?”

“W-well…”

“Listen carefully, Hiba. They’re firing guns at us, but America is the land of freedom. If you handle this properly, you won’t be filled with holes. Also, remember that Mikage was captured.”

“Y-you’re right. She was.”

“And this is the most important thing: America keeps things uncensored.”

Izumo laughed and slapped Hiba’s back.

“I’m kind of jealous, you lucky boy!!”

As he ran, he circled ahead of Hiba and hit the shorter boy in the gut with a short uppercut.

“Go be a decoy for a bit.”

●

It had been a while since he had been hit like that, so Hiba lost consciousness for an instant.

He could not breathe at first.

…Kh.

With that mental voice of endurance, he came back to his senses and strength returned to his body.

“Ah.”

He looked forward and saw the end of the passageway about three hundred meters ahead. The wall there seemed to be blocking his way, but he saw a large shadow running left to right under the emergency lighting.

It was Izumo in his school uniform.

The boy did not even glance back, so Hiba gave a bitter smile.

“I can’t believe this.”

Behind him, he heard several sets of footsteps that filled the waterway with ripples.

He turned around just as light reached him.

There were eight lights and he estimated they were about fifty meters away.

These were American UCAT soldiers.

He wondered if Izumo was right and he could be reunited with Mikage if he handled this properly. He brought a hand to his face and thought about it.

…What should I do about this?

As he hesitated, the footsteps that had passed the fifty-meter mark suddenly stopped.

He heard no gunshots or anything else. He only heard the flowing water and his own heavy breathing.

“———————!”

He heard someone shout in English and it echoed down the passageway.

…What did they say?

His grades in English class were average, but listening comprehension did not begin until the third term for first years. When he heard the same shout again, he tilted his head. Assuming it

was universally understood, he took a pose with spread arms as if letting rain wash over him.

A bullet shot by overhead.

“…”

Hiba remained silent and heard the same English word shouted again.

…Will they shoot me without question if I don’t do as they say?

As he wondered that, the same English shout came once more.

“————————!”

He listened as carefully as he could and managed to comprehend what the man was saying.

However, he immediately felt a chill run down his back and into his butt. After all, the word he had heard was…

…Freeze?

I can’t literally freeze myself like ice, he thought. *So what does it mean?*

…Does he mean they’re going to shoot me and throw my body in cold storage!?

His thoughts filled with doubt and panic, but some advice saved him. It was what Izumo had told him earlier.

“America is the land of freedom,” he muttered to himself.

He thought a little more and found his answer.

…“Freeze” doesn’t make any sense, so they can’t possibly mean that.

America respected freedom. It was the land of freedom. In that case, he was not hearing the word “freeze”.

…It’s “frees”. The plural of “free”.

The man was telling him to express freedom. Even if they did not speak the same language, if he could use gestures to express how full of freedom he was, he would demonstrate his wholehearted approval of the American way.

I see. So this is the American way of freeing oneself, he thought. *But how am I supposed to show freedom in a way that anyone can understand?*

“…”

Silence fell and he finally reached his answer.

In the center of the lights converging on him, Hiba danced the dance of freedom.

He danced and danced.

He danced his heart out.

It was a very strange dance.

“Ahh.”

Hiba thought to himself.

…I never knew my body and heart could grow so bold.

His audience reacted with surprised voices tinged with fear and then gunfire.

Chapter 16

“The True Contents of One’s Heart”

Who decided that one’s true feelings are correct?
Who decided that what is correct should be called one’s true feelings?

●

The color white filled a small room.

The white walls, white floor, white ceiling, white bed, and white curtains made up a hospital room.

The view from outside the single window was a bit high and nothing but vast fields could be seen beyond the parking lot.

This was a personal room on the second floor.

A middle-aged woman sat up in the bed with her back against her pillow. She wore white pajamas and her hair was graying and tied back. She currently fixed that hair with one hand.

“Dan? Is something the matter?”

Her voice was directed at the room’s entrance.

A boy casually wearing a school uniform stood there as if protecting the door. The boy, Dan Harakawa, turned to face the woman and finally twisted his head as if turning his shoulders.

“No, nothing’s wrong, mom.”

“Really?” asked the woman while reaching her left hand to the side table.

A plastic storage case sat there and she opened the slide cover that contained the name “Harakawa Yui”.

“Do you want one of the apples you brought by before?”

“Eat it yourself.”

“If you buy that many for me, I’ll get tired of them. …You really are a boy.”

Yui narrowed her eyes and smiled while pulling out a knife, a tray, and an apple.

“Did something happen to you? Is that why you ignored your usual schedule and visited in the morning?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Then let me ask you this, Dan. Did something happen to someone other than you?”

“…”

Harakawa answered with silence, but his mother only peeled the apple without saying anything more.

She peeled the juicy fruit and the sound gently filled the room.

As if that was his cue, Harakawa crossed his legs, took a breath, and spoke.

“Can I ask something?”

She did not reply, but he continued regardless.

“You worked for IAI, didn’t you?”

“Yes. It was that work that sent me to Yokota where I met your father. …Do you have some social studies homework? Do you have to research your parents’ jobs?”

“We haven’t had to do that since elementary school and this has nothing to do with that man. Because he had to go off and get himself killed.”

After a short pause, he spoke again.

“Sorry.”

He uncrossed his arms and scratched his head with his right hand.

He brushed his fingers through his hair, returned his crossed legs to normal, and crossed his arms again instead.

“I just have a simple question: have you ever heard of a part of IAI called UCAT?”

“Where did you hear about that?”

“I’m only asking if you’ve heard of it.”

“Dan.”

He heard a voice call his name and he froze in place.

However, the sound of apple peeling continued and he answered after listening to it for a moment.

“Someone wants that place to protect them and my idiot classmates know about it, but I’ve never heard of it even after all the deliveries I’ve made to IAI with my job on the base.”

“Oh, dear. You think what you’ve seen is everything, don’t you?”

Yui then asked a question.

“Can you not trust what those people are saying? Or are you worried that your classmates are mistaken or lying and then the person seeking help will have nowhere to go?”

Harakawa did not respond. He merely listened to the peeling of the apple and a bitter laugh.

“I know you won’t like to hear it, but you really are just like your father in that regard.”

“Please stop comparing me to him.”

“But if I don’t do that, I can’t see how you differ either.”

“Most of it has to be how we’re different.” He closed his eyes, sighed, and took in a deep breath. “He always put others first. He

would always neglect us for his military job and what the hell was he doing at the very end? He was a sniper, but he went out of his way to help with that Great Kansai Earthquake and died. …I won't turn out like that. I swear it."

"Then are you going to spend your entire life supporting only yourself and me? I caught this illness while helping with that earthquake, but I do receive some compensation for it."

"Sorry, but we don't have enough to support me or anything above the bare minimum for you. Even my attendance at school is just barely enough as I'm sure you know from my teacher visiting you. How am I supposed to guarantee anything more than this? Of course, I know this isn't your fault. This is…"

"Then is it your father's fault?"

Harakawa did not reply, but Yui gave a small smile.

"I was the one that got off topic there. Sorry. As for the UCAT you mentioned, an organization named that does exist in IAI. But it's more like a subsidiary of IAI than a part of IAI itself. So…"

"So that's why I didn't know about it?"

This time, Yui did not reply and she had finished peeling the apple.

"See, I'm still plenty skilled with my hands."

She picked up the single, continuous piece of apple skin to show him.

"Dan, open the window."

Harakawa began to move as if peeling himself from the door. He took long strides past the bottom of the bed and reached for the latch on the window that faced the morning sun.

"Dan, your bracelet is about to break. Should I make you a new one as a protective charm?"

He looked down at the bracelet made of stones, but it did not seem anywhere near breaking to him.

Nevertheless…

"If that'll help you kill some time."

After giving permission, he opened the window.

The wind blew in.

The autumn wind was warm yet chilled the skin. The curtains blew around a little and Yui's voice reached him.

"You need to take care of things. Especially girls."

"I'm well aware of-… Wait. What's this about girls?"

"Look down. She's been looking around impatiently for a while now."

He looked down at the parking lot where his motorcycle was parked. The sidecar had its cover up to prevent anyone from seeing inside, but…

"She's been peeking out the window at the sky and field, but she clearly wants to leave. Much like a kitten. Based on how she looks, is she a foreigner from the base?"

"Some of the thoughts in her head certainly are foreign."

Harakawa's shoulders drooped and Yui said one more thing.

"Help your mother kill some time. It's been a long while since I last spoke with a girl."

●

"This ocean is terrible. This ocean is a terrible place to kill some time."

Some dry English filled the air.

The voice came from a concrete wharf with the green and black of the ocean spreading out in front of it.

An elderly man in a suit stood on that wharf.

It was Odor.

He looked around and saw several large ships stopped along that wharf. They were all cargo ships that rose the equivalent of three stories above the wharf.

However, those ships were not moving. There was light in their windows, but no one could be seen inside the windows or on their decks.

The usual loading and transport of cargo was nowhere to be seen.

The wharf was the same. The large forklifts loaded with cargo containers were stopped and no workers were visible among the surrounding containers needing to be transported.

Something else was visible instead.

"Those are the mechanical dragons," said Roger as he stepped out from behind a container.

He quickly approached Odor who stood on the water's edge and he was looking to the blue and white mechanical dragon unit formed up behind one of the wharf's large warehouses.

"Colonel, the six mechanical dragons from Atsugi have arrived.

The first wave of interception against Black Sun will include twelve craft. Japanese UCAT's Kanda Laboratory has agreed to use their large Accel Point creation device on the Accel Point currently surrounding this wharf once Black Sun appears."

"And in exchange? What do they get in exchange, Roger?"

"The safety of those underneath Okutama. An easy price to pay, don't you think? And in exchange, they will expand the Accel Point from Tokyo Bay to the Chuo Expressway and from the Chofu Interchange to the Trans-Tokyo Line that connects National Route 20. Black Sun will likely add 5th-Gear Accels to that space and fly toward the Vesper Cannon, but we will catch up and destroy him before he reaches Okutama."

"Is it perfect? Is it perfect with just them, Roger?

"Testament. When they arrived at their positions earlier, did anything look inadequate to you, colonel? This is their job…just like we have our own jobs."

Roger then looked out to sea.

"Black Sun has settled down outside of Tokyo Bay and we lost track of him."

"Roger, Roger. Is it possible he'll show up elsewhere?"

"Testament. We cannot rule it out, but including the repaired craft, there are a total of ten at Okutama now that four more have arrived and Yokota has sent out patrol planes. Of course, it is possible Black Sun's stealth ability outdoes our technology."

"In other words. In other words, Roger, this plan is not perfect?"

"I did not say that," replied Roger without fear. "We are doing our job perfectly, but our enemy is also perfect."

"Roger, Roger. That is a vague way of talking. But I am fortunate to have you as my aide. This cooperation between Yokota and Atsugi would have been impossible for the members of American UCAT who have never left the United States."

"I am pleased to hear that."

Roger bowed and Odor put his hands in his pockets.

"Roger, Roger. Do you have any intention of telling us about your past?"

"Has your wife told you anything?"

"Roger, Roger. You know her better than I do. To me, she is only the woman I made a mutual promise with to care for each other in

our final days."

Roger said nothing about her and simply looked up into the sky.

"What were you doing during the Gulf War, colonel?"

"I was going around taking care of mysterious incidents occurring in the country."

"I was part of an internal inspection team that inspected the condition of injured soldiers. Those who were thought to be victims of biological or chemical weapons were rushed to Yokota because Japanese UCAT had advanced their Accel method research far enough to cure them in a number of effective ways. American UCAT provided guidance," explained Roger. "I got to know the ones who had suggested the idea. Including a descendent of Lord Northwind, a hero of World War Two, most of them had relatives who had dealt with Japanese UCAT during the National Defense Department days. …And one of them was James Thunderson after he left American UCAT."

"I see, I see. And?"

"Testament. American UCAT's primary base in Japan is underneath Yokota and I met them during joint training at that base. Thanks to that, my connection with them continued even after the Gulf War."

Roger lowered his gaze toward one of the mechanical dragons and the maintenance soldiers between the wharf's large warehouses.

"Thunderson's mechanical dragon was a modified version of the Thunderbird which had lost the development race against that Blanca 9. He preferred the superior stability and safety of the Thunderbird over the full transformation of the Blanca series."

With a slight smile, he looked to the city beyond the wharf: Tokyo.

A white haze covered the many buildings, but their windows reflected some light back.

Odor asked a question while still facing the ocean.

"They…died, didn't they?"

"Testament. And all at the same place. We answered a request for help from Japanese UCAT and travelled to that place along with your wife."

"Roger, Roger. I hadn't met her yet back then. And I hear you were sent out to assist with the recovery after the Great Kansai

Earthquake, but is that true?"

"Testament. If there is no one but us that can speak of it, then I suppose it is true," said Roger. "But I…survived. And Japanese UCAT's defenses were too strict, so I could not find out what happened to most of the families afterwards. I do know that Thunderson's wife took their daughter to the United States and visited his grandfather."

"…"

"I have no intention of placing Thunderson's daughter in danger."

Odor nodded just before footsteps approached them.

A woman in a blue armored uniform ran out from behind a warehouse.

"Colonel, major, we have a transmission from the base."

She carried a memo and her voice continued on to the ocean containing no one but them.

"The satellite has photographed an individual who seems to be the target. Shall we send personnel out to Akigawa Central Hospital?"

Roger turned to Odor.

While still looking out to sea, the elderly man removed his right hand from his pocket and reached into his suit pocket.

He pulled out an aluminum case containing cigars.

"Roger, Roger. I won't get mad, so tell me: who here has the least to do and is most in the way? If your answer is the two of us, then let's get to work."

●

"Are you sure I'm not in the way?" asked Heo.

She was inside a hospital room and sitting on a round stool next to the bed.

She held her hands between her thighs and shrank down while asking another question to the women in the bed.

"Um, where is Harakawa?"

"I had him wait down below, so don't worry."

The one speaking was the woman who was apparently Harakawa's mother. Her name was Yui and Heo had just named herself as well.

After the introductions, Heo was unsure what to do.

Not only did she not know what to talk about, she did not know if

the two of them had a single common topic to speak about. Yui had apparently said she wanted to speak with Heo, but she had not asked the girl anything.

"Would you like an apple? I peeled one for him earlier."

"Oh, thank you."

"Did you not have enough for breakfast? He does make meals for guys."

"No, he made toast and salad and even gave me some milk."

"I see. In other words, you spent the night with him, didn't you, Heo-san?"

"Ah." Heo noticed the leading question too late and frantically waved her hands back and forth. "U-um, uh, we're not in that kind of relationship or anything."

"But as a guy, he has to take responsibility for what he's done, doesn't he?"

"No, um, I don't mind that he saw me naked."

"I see. So he saw you naked."

"Ah."

Heo blushed at that second leading statement and Yui gave a bitter laugh.

"Don't worry. If he had done anything, I'm sure he would have said something about it first."

Yui pulled an apple from the storage case on the side table.

Heo looked up when she heard the sound of the knife peeling it.

"You're really good at that."

"Want to try it with the next one? No, how about we each peel one for each other?"

Yui looked inside the case which contained a single apple inside a plastic bag as well as a teacup and some other things.

Heo nodded and Yui began peeling the apple once more.

"Heo-san? It sounds like you're having a hard time."

"Eh? Did Harakawa tell you?"

She had thought he had not believed her, but had he really?

"I hear you met a monster."

"Y-yes, that's right. And then I was separated from my great-grandfather."

"I see. I hope you can see him again. But if you have nowhere to go, feel free to stay with that boy."

“No, that would be too much trouble for him.” Heo hesitated and tensed her shoulders. “I think it would be better if I found a relative before long.”

“Oh, dear. It looks like he has gotten very good at drawing in girls.”

“N-no, that isn’t it.”

“I see. Then what is it?”

Yui asked with a smile, so Heo blushed even more, shook her head, and further tensed her shoulders.

“A-as I said, I’m just trouble for him. I really am.”

“Are you really? He doesn’t seem to mind all that much. If he really did mind, he wouldn’t push you away. He would leave on his own.”

“Eh?”

Her confusion cooled her face, but Yui continued talking like usual while moving her hands in the morning sunlight.

“If he did not like you, he would find some reason or another to leave the apartment, just like a stray dog going on a trip to avoid a turf war. But if he’s staying by your side instead, he must be at ease.”

“…”

“He has trouble fitting in at school and he works at the base but doesn’t live there. He has always chosen to live a solitary life, but now he has let a kitten into his space.”

Heo did not entirely understand what the woman had said with a smile.

However, she did grasp that Harakawa did not dislike her as much as she had thought.

…But why not?

She had done nothing but cause trouble for him, so it seemed odd that he would *not* dislike her.

That doubt led to a question which she expressed in words.

“But why does he let me be with him?”

“That I don’t know. You’re closer to him than me, so have you noticed anything interesting about him?”

Having the question thrown back at her, Heo thought.

…Well…

She did not have to think for long.

She came up with something in only a few seconds and it was something she had spoken with him about the night before.

“He has a bookshelf in his room’s closet, but what is that? If this is something I shouldn’t ask, then pretend I didn’t.”

“A bookshelf?”

“Yes. It had a lot of technical books, novels, and lots of different hard covers.”

As she spoke, Yui suddenly bent over.

She leaned forward as if she had fallen.

“————!”

Thinking the woman was in pain, Heo started to get up, but she soon realized the woman was quietly laughing.

Yui must have noticed Heo’s movement because she raised her shaking shoulders.

“Sorry, but that was just too funny. …That boy can be so stubborn and it reminds me so much of that man.”

“Stubborn?”

“He actually loves books,” replied Yui. “When we lived on the base, everything was very noisy and it was hard to make many friends, so as a child, he would often read books for us in the house. Once he started doing that, my husband began buying all sorts of books. …Surprised?”

Heo tensed her shoulders and shook her head.

“N-no, not really.”

“You can laugh if you want. …Anyway, at one point, my husband said he was going to quit the military. It seemed he thought what he was doing there was wrong. When he did, he promised to leave the base, buy a large white house, open a bookstore or used bookstore there, and live a quiet life. But one night, he was called in under special circumstances, and…” Yui shrugged. “You can use the current situation to guess what happened.”

“Sorry.”

“For what?”

Heo trembled a bit at that quiet question.

“That Harakawa’s father, um…”

“Passed away? What makes you think that?”

Heo replied on reflex.

“If he was alive, I think Harakawa would have said something. I’m

the type that likes to remember and talk about what I've lost so I can live with it more easily, but I think he's the opposite."

"…"

"Am I…wrong?"

As soon as she asked that, a tray carrying apple slices was held out to her. When she took it, Yui's hand reached out to her head.

The woman stroked Heo's head as if brushing her hair

Heo gave a small gasp and something spilled from her eyes.

The word "tears" did not immediately come to mind and she remembered something else instead.

…My mom used to do this for me, didn't she?

"…"

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry. Did I startle you?"

"No, y-you didn't. I just remembered the past a bit is all."

She wiped the remaining tears from her eyes and smiled. So as not to worry the woman, she hurriedly took the last apple from the storage case.

"H-how about I peel this one?"

Yui smiled and stroked her head one last time.

While feeling a little disappointed that the woman was removing her hand, Heo took the knife from the tray.

"Heo-san? May I ask you something?"

"Y-yes. What is it?"

"It's easy to tell when you are lying, so be careful when deceiving people."

"Eh?"

"That's my only hint. You are on your way to the Nishitama Cemetery, correct? Then hurry up and peel that apple and feed it to this old woman."

"I feel bad making Harakawa wait, but I'm slow with my hands."

With that, Heo lowered her head and worked.

She was fairly confident in using a knife because her mother had taught her. That was due to helping her mother make apple pies and jams while younger. One could even say cooking was her hobby.

…But I want to stay here a little longer.

Yet when she remembered that she might be followed by a demon, she hung her head even further. She doubted she would ever receive any peace in the future either.

…This is just like why I cried while running at his school last night.

To get her mind off that, she looked at Yui and the woman tilted her head.

“What is it?”

“Oh, um, nothing.”

Heo shrank down with a single thought in her mind.

…Has Harakawa given up on his future?

Chapter 17

“Meeting of Conflict”

We meet again
We clash again
But that too is not new

●

The color green lay below the blue of the sky.

The green took the form of a slope and the slope was located above a great expanse of salt water.

It was an island.

The island was only about a kilometer long, had a small pier on the east side, and had no buildings. The outer edges were covered in grass and most of the upper area had a roof of trees.

The only boat at the pier was a small fishing boat.

A path leading up the mountain-like island continued west of the pier and three figures were walking below the trees on that mountain path.

The one in the lead was an animal.

It was a six-legged creature that was made up of green plants. A blue stone hung from a string around his neck like a collar and he quickly climbed the mountain path that had little wind.

Suddenly, the plant creature stopped walking and turned around.

The two open holes on what seemed to be his face turned to the two people following him.

One was what appeared to be a girl in a safari coat and the other was a boy in a blue suit.

The one in the suit brushed a hand through his slicked-back hair and spoke.

“Shinjou-kun, he looks like he’s asking if you want to take a break.”

“N-no, I’m fine, Sayama-kun. The shade of the forest has cooled things down.”

Shinjou loosened her safari coat’s collar, wiped sweat from her brow with a towel, and smiled.

She was different from usual. Her hair was tied back as she did for Setsu, but it was tied with a ribbon and her clothes were different.

“Did you choose the tight miniskirt to combine Setsu-kun and Sadame-kun today?”

“Yes. …Is it weird?”

She brought her hands to her shoulders and showed him her outfit, but he shook his head.

She breathed a sigh of relief and smiled again.

“Thanks. Things went well with Setsu last night while dressed as Sadame, so while dressing this morning, I thought it would be best not to distinguish between them so much.”

She gave a bitter smile.

“When I tied the ribbon in the bathroom, I thought of it as crossdressing, but that’s kind of weird when I use ribbons for Sadame’s hair all the time. …But I’m relieved to hear you say it isn’t weird.”

Despite smiling, her eyebrows were slightly lowered the entire time.

“We’re almost to the peak, aren’t we? Let’s hurry. I want to learn all sorts of things and I also want to stop by Izumo HQ to look for information on the Shinjou from the National Defense Department. And I’m worried about Okutama too.”

“Is that so?”

終わりのクロニクル

Sayama nodded toward the plant creature and the creature began walking once more. His rushing footsteps could be heard when he stepped on dried branches on the ground, but his gait was light as if he was enjoying it.

The two who followed him did not stop walking through the shade of the trees even as they listened to the occasional chirping of birds.

Shinjou let out a shallow breath of exhaustion.

“I wonder what the others are doing.”

“Izumo, Kazami, and the Hiba boy should be monitoring Harakawa’s apartment.”

“That’s not who I meant. I was talking about the people at school.”

She brushed a hand through her bangs which were plastered to her forehead with sweat and she looked at the plant creature walking ahead on the path. She then looked at the trees that seemed to be growing from a sea of underbrush.

“They would never imagine we’re in a place like this.”

While glancing around, she looked beyond the forest. Due to their elevation, the sea seemed to spread out down below and the tiny dots of boats were visible here and there.

When she looked even further, she saw land. That was the western coast of Kyushu.

While occasionally checking on her footing, she continued looking at the sea.

“I feel a little guilty for having so much fun in the middle of so much trouble.”

“No matter what happens in life, most anything can be settled by saying, ‘Oh, how delightful!’ ”

“Hey, I see some kind of big facility on the opposite coast. Do you think it’s a nuclear power plant?”

“Oh, how delightful!”

“I don’t think’s quite the right way to look at that.”

As the two walked, they quickened their pace to catch up with the plant creature. The path curved to the left and thus to the center of the island and the ocean visible through the trees changed. Shinjou spoke up with the chirping of birds overhead.

“Sayama-kun, do you think this path is ever used?”

“It seems Nagasaki UCAT maintains it and preserves the forest.

The 4th-Gear reservation is up ahead, but a forest is needed as a foundation if the reservation is ever to be expanded."

"I see," she said with a nod.

She then saw something dark cutting across the path and jumped over it.

"Is that a water pipe?"

"I assume they are drawing fresh water from underground. That way they can cover the island in the damp environment 4th-Gear prefers."

"That means the reservation is right up ahead, doesn't it?"

As soon as she said that, the plant creature turned toward them up ahead.

"…"

And he suddenly vanished.

Just as Shinjou gave a quiet "ah" at that fact, she felt a vibration.

The watches she and Sayama wore vibrated and text scrolled across the dial.

- **—Plants are the rulers.**

An instant later, they were surrounded by even more green.

They had entered the 4th-Gear reservation.

●

A wristwatch indicated the time was two o'clock.

The black watch was wrapped around a thick arm that was connected to a large body that was leaning against a tree.

Next to the watch's wearer was a girl also hiding with her back against the tree.

She peered around from the right of the tree and saw the blue sky and slightly blurry white clouds.

"The gravestones block people's view more than you would think. But you're tall, Kaku, so be careful."

"Sure, but I didn't expect them to be visiting a cemetery. Chisato, which one of them do you think wanted to have a date here?"

Izumo peered around the tree on the opposite side from Kazami.

The two of them were watching two other people walk between the orderly rows of gravestones.

One was a black-haired boy in a school uniform and the other was a blonde girl in a hoodie.

“Kaku, is that blonde girl Heo? She looks like the girl in the photo.”

“That’s a good question,” said Izumo noncommittally. “She is looking around curiously while he isn’t. I know what makes people act like that because I did it myself once. She’s not used to Japan.”

“Harakawa is checking that sign for the cemetery’s map. It looks like they’re headed to the foreigner area.”

“Does that mean the Harakawa or Thunderson family has a grave here?”

Izumo’s suggestion caused Kazami to stop moving.

She narrowed her eyes and stared at Harakawa and Heo as they walked between the gravestones. She then tilted her head.

“They have too many flowers.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are two containers for flowers at the grave. One on either side. But they have two flowers each.”

That meant…

“They might be visiting both the Harakawa and the Thunderson graves. What do you think?”

“I’m not sure what to think. It could be a coincidence and it may have some kind of meaning, but I don’t know what that meaning is. Either way, this means both of them have a parent buried here.”

“Yes…you’re right. Maybe we’re overthinking this?”

Kazami spoke aloud and nodded as if trying to convince herself.

After a pause, she nodded again, but she grabbed G-Sp2 from where it was leaning against the tree. She took a step forward and away from the tree, but Izumo called out to her.

“Hey, Chisato.”

“They’re going to move out of sight if we don’t move. Stay low and follow me.”

“If you insist,” said Izumo as he crouched down.

He grabbed V-Sw from the tree and soon made his way to her.

He glanced at her for a quick moment and then back at the two backs moving away.

“Chisato, you might’ve been onto something just now.”

“In what way?”

“My grandfather’s grave is up ahead too.”

She frowned at that and frantically looked around.

“W-wait a second. I need to buy some flowers for him and greet him. Um, what does your grandfather like? Porn magazines?”

“Chisato, make up your mind whether you’re gonna be polite or rude. But yeah, probably porn magazines. I’m sure he’d love it if we opened one and propped it up against the next grave up so he could look at it. …Anyway, can we get back on topic?”

“Sure. You were saying?”

She held her spear under one arm and began counting the contents of her wallet, but Izumo continued regardless.

“Not only is my grandfather’s grave up ahead, but so is Sayama’s grandfather’s, the Ooshiro family’s…and probably the Hiba family’s too.”

“Eh?”

Kazami’s expression and the hand in her wallet both froze.

She also stopped walking, so Izumo did as well. She glanced toward Harakawa and Heo to make sure she would not lose sight of them and then looked back at Izumo.

“What does that mean?”

“It means all those perverted old men are competing together for pervert supremacy in the afterlife. It seems a section of this cemetery is used for UCAT members after they die,” he explained. “But the old Thunderson still hasn’t been placed in the Thunderson grave and what about Harakawa? If his grandfather or grandmother had been a part of the original UCAT, we would’ve seen his name in the documents the military god papa gave us. In that case, it must be a parent of his that’s in the Harakawa grave.”

“The Harakawa and Thunderson parents? Why would they be in a cemetery for UCAT-…”

Kazami trailed off, glanced back and forth as if checking something, looked down, and finally returned her gaze at Izumo.

“Kaku, can I make a prediction?”

“Sure. My prediction for our future is two kids and a giant house.”

She took G-Sp2 from under her arm and spun it around a little to take care of that, but the concern remained in her expression even as Izumo collapsed.

“What if it’s the people who died in the secondary damages of the

Great Kansai Earthquake? That could explain the graves from their parents' generation."

"It is possible their parents were in UCAT back then." Izumo got up and brushed off the dirt. "But it's a pain how so many mysteries are popping up. I wish we could've told Sayama this last night."

"Why?"

"He and Shinjou are going to the IAI headquarters in Izumo, remember? My dad's there and he should know just about everything. If they strangle him and have him spill the beans, it would solve everything."

"Um, Kaku?" Kazami lowered the ends of her eyebrows but still smiled. "I've only spoken with your dad that one time two years ago, but I doubt he would say anything even if they strangled him."

"You're taking his side?"

"In a roundabout way, I was complimenting you."

Bitterness entered her smile and she brushed some dirt off his shoulder.

"Anyway, let's see where those two are headed. We can talk after that."

"Right."

Izumo raised his hips and Kazami did the same.

Harakawa and Heo had grown more distance and Izumo and Kazami stood up some because they doubted the other two would notice and because they wanted to hurry up and get closer.

But they soon noticed someone else standing on the next row of gravestones.

It was likely someone visiting a grave, so Kazami lowered her head a bit and pushed the back of Izumo's head so he would do the same.

The other person also nodded and then their gazes met.

Kazami realized there was an entire group beyond the row of graves.

Most of them wore blue armored uniforms beneath their suits and they had machineguns hidden inside their bouquets of flowers.

In the lead was an elderly man in a suit and…

"Roger Sully!!" shouted Kazami.

After a moment, Roger looked up in surprise.

"Why are you here!? Are you here to do perverted things in the

graveyard!?”

“Who are you calling perverted!? And I see that look on your face, Kaku, but stay quiet!”

She ignored how Izumo timidly stuck his right thumb in his mouth and she quickly held up G-Sp2.

Meanwhile, Roger and the others took a large step back and similarly prepared for battle.

The wind blew in and the sunlight passed through the clouds while the elderly man raised his right arm and spoke to Roger.

“Roger, Roger. Who are these two? I remember seeing one of them this morning!”

“Testament. Colonel Odor, they are a dangerous pair. After all…” He took in a breath. “When I gave them a dream yesterday, both of them independently began a one-man kissing and groping scene!”

“Y-you don’t have to get into so much detail! And Kaku, this is not the time to ask me if it’s true!”

“Roger, Roger. These are students yet they were making out? Japan truly is a depraved country!”

Kazami fired while making sure not to hit any of the gravestones.

Afterword

Hello. It's been a while, but this is Kawakami.

The air felt so very thick this summer and it made 4-A very thick as well. …I'm sorry. I got carried away. This book is so thick simply because I naively thought I could finish all this in a single book.

Now, this story is about plants and dragons, but I am raising(?) a single plant in my home. It started out quite small, but as I gave it water, it grew to over a meter tall and had to say the following:

"D-damn you. Quit trying to assert your presence in this small house."

And so I am now restricting its growth with manmade rainy seasons and dry seasons. Even when you remove the buds, the stem keeps growing. And it started spreading outwards rather than continuing up, so it's a clever little thing.

Now for the usual chat.

"Did you read it?"

"I'm just going to say it now. Do the afterwords of this series really help the readers in any way? I've been wondering that."

"You like getting to the heart of the issue instead of talking about the book, don't you? To bluntly comment about your personality, I doubt you can get married like this. Anyway, did you read it?"

"You just want me to talk about something painful when I was a student, right?"

"Now you're *really* getting to the heart of the issue. What a dreadful child!"

"From what I've seen in the chats with the others, there's not much that requires actually reading the book."

"You're not supposed to say that, T-kun! It's just that the others are all a sad kind of person!!"

"Look in the mirror and you'll find another. Anyway, I'll ignore all that and just say it. On the way home from high school one day, I smelled some really good curry while passing by an apartment building near the school. I lost track of where I was and started jumping up and down to reach the smell, but a high school girl happened to walk out from a corner and I ran away as fast as I could."

“Okay, 4-B is next. It comes out next month.”

“Wait, wait! Are you really leaving it at that!?”

You’re a said kind of person too. Congrats. Anyway, my BGM this time was Halo from the video game Halo. (I like the part with a march tempo and I chose it for this book because it’s from an American game.)

“Who was hiding their true self?”

I also thought on that.

Okay, just wait for the second half.

October 2004. A typhoon-filled morning.

-Kawakami Minoru

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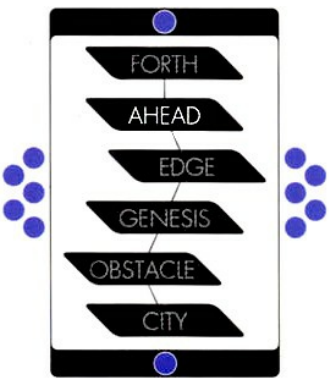

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